CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

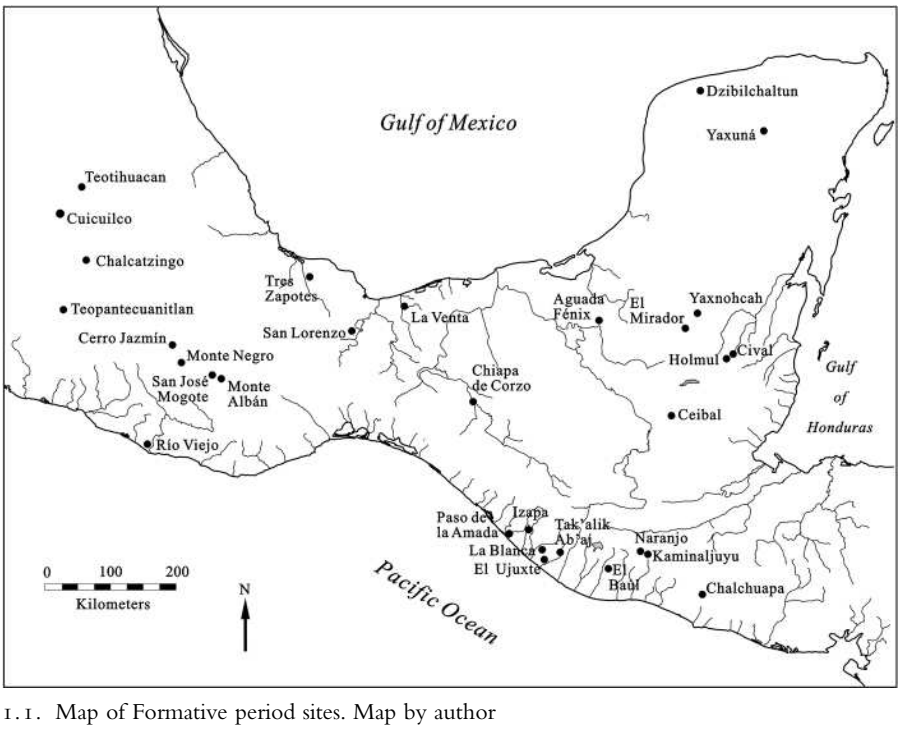
Early Mesoamerican Cities, Urbanism, and Urbanization in the Formative Period

Michael Love

Ancient Mesoamerica was a land of cities (fig. 1.1). Above all, it was the number and the density of cities that distinguished Mesoamerica from the complex societies in neighboring areas of North America and lower Central America. Further, although ancient Mesoamerican cities interacted to varying degrees with those cultures to the north and south, they interacted most intensively with one another. It was the shared cultural practices produced by those relationships that define Mesoamerica (Kirchoff 1943; R. Joyce 2004a). In short, Mesoamerica is defined by its cities, their interactions with one another, and the cultural patterns created and sustained by those relationships. It is the beginnings of those cities, and their interactions, that form the principal themes of this volume.

The temporal focus of this volume is the Formative or Preclassic[1] period, when the earliest Mesoamerican cities came to be and when patterns of interaction were first shaped. Not too long ago, the phrase "Formative period urbanism" would have been viewed as an oxymoron. Formative period settlements in Mesoamerica were described as villages, hamlets, and small towns; they were called anything but cities. The reluctance to embrace Formative period urbanism is unwarranted, as can be seen in Table 1.1, which

[1] The editors have respected individual authors' preferences for the use of the terms "Formative" or "Preclassic," either of which refers to the same temporal span of roughly 2000 BCE–300 CE. All of the authors in this volume use calibrated dates.



1.1. Map of Formative period sites. Map by author

compares the sizes of the cities of Formative period Mesoamerica with settlements considered to be the earliest cities in other parts of the world. The Mesoamerican examples fit quite comfortably, and we should put to rest any accusations of "city envy." Moreover, research over recent decades has demonstrated that the Formative period of Mesoamerica (2000 BCE–300 CE) was not a mere prelude to the Classic period (300–900 CE). In fact, for some regions, populations were higher and there was greater sociopolitical complexity during the Formative period than in the ensuing Classic period. Not only were there true cities in the Formative period, but many were larger than those of the Classic (A. Joyce 2009; Love 2010, 2011a, 2014; Pool 2012).

WHY THINK ABOUT URBANISM AND URBANIZATION?

Urbanization is a phenomenon that brings into focus many topics of broad interest to all disciplines that investigate the human past; its study is also an enduring interest of anthropological archaeology and kindred disciplines. As a transformational process, urbanization changes the relationships between many social and cultural variables including demography, economy, political structures, and ideology. Urbanization is more than just population growth and nucleation, however; the emergent properties of urbanization create new identities, economic relationships, materialities, and social realities (M. L. Smith 2003,

TABLE 1.1. *Comparison of the size of Formative period Mesoamerican cities with that of early cities in other parts of the world – Mesoamerican data provided by contributors to this volume*

Region	City	Area (hectares)	Dates of Occupation	References
Mesopotamia				
	Nagar	100		Emberling 2003
	Kish	550		Moorey 1978
	Uruk	250		Nissen 2001
Andes				
	Moche	135		Chapdelaine 2000
	Tiwanaku	600		Janusek 2008
	Wari	600		Schreiber 2001
Gulf Coast				
	San Lorenzo	500–700	1450–1000 BCE	Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3
	La Venta	400	1000–400 BCE	Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3
	Cerro de las Mesas	146	600 BCE – 300 CE	Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3
	Tres Zapotes	500	400 BCE – 300 CE	Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3
Maya Lowlands				
	El Mirador	450 core, 1600 overall		Demarest 2004; Hansen 2016
	Cival	70 core, 685 settlement	1000 BCE – 200 CE	Estrada-Belli 2006, 2011
	Holmul	55 core 1200 settlement	1000 BCE – 1000 CE	Estrada-Belli 2011
	Yaxuná	800–900	300 BCE – 200 CE	Stanton and Collins, Chapter 4
Western Mesoamerica				
	Río Viejo	225	700 BCE – 1100 CE	Joyce, Chapter 2
	Huamelulpan	212		Joyce, Chapter 2
	Yucuita	100		Joyce, Chapter 2
	Cerro Jazmín	86		Joyce, Chapter 2
	Monte Negro	78		Joyce, Chapter 2
	Monte Albán	442	500 BCE – 800 CE	Marcus and Flannery 1996
	Teotihuacan	2000		Cowgill 2015
Southern Maya Region				
	Chocolá	800		Kaplan and Valdés 2004
	El Ujuxte	400 core, 900 overall	300 BCE – 100 CE	Love 2011
	Izapa	800		Love and Rosenswig, Chapter 7
	Kaminaljuyu	900 in Late Preclassic		Love 2011
	Tak'alik Ab'aj	650 in Late Preclassic	100 BCE – 100 CE	Popenoe de Hatch et al. 2011

2019; Yoffee 2005). Analysis of first-generation urbanization therefore offers an important opportunity to achieve a holistic perspective on important changes in the human condition as well as a myriad of issues of interest to the humanities and social sciences.

As one of the limited number of cases in the world where urban centers developed independently, Mesoamerica should play a major role in the world-wide comparative analysis of early cities and the emergence of urbanism in general. Some of the contributions to be made by such engagement are addressed by Monica Smith and Norman Yoffee in their chapters here (Chapters 10 and 11, respectively). Nevertheless, the perception among many scholars, perhaps even most, around the globe is that Mesoamerican cities developed relatively late in comparison to the rest of the world. Major publications discussing early urbanism continue to draw their Mesoamerican case studies from the Classic and Postclassic periods (e.g., Marcus and Sabloff 2008; Mastache et al. 2008; Sanders et al. 2003; M. L. Smith 2003; Storey 2006). Although recent works focusing on Mesoamerican urbanism increasingly make reference to Formative period cities (e.g., Arnauld 2012; Blanton 2012; Carballo 2016; A. Joyce 2009; Pool 2012), they generally do so from a local or regional perspective. Frequently, a case is made for an individual settlement as a Formative period city, but the site under consideration is presented as precocious or unique, and the arguments sometimes peppered with hyperbolic verbiage such as "Mesoamerica's first city" or the "cradle of Mesoamerican civilization." The case of Monte Albán is an exception to such exclusion, as that settlement has long been recognized as a Formative period city, and has received extensive attention over the past thirty years or more (Blanton et al. 1993; A. Joyce 2009; Marcus and Flannery 1996; Spencer and Redmond 2004). It has not been discussed, however, as part of the widespread development of cities across Mesoamerica in the Late Formative. Another powerful point of comparison is found in the recent work by David Carballo (2016), truly a milestone, which makes the case for extensive Formative period urbanism in Central Mexico, but still includes scant reference to that region's links to other areas. In sum, we might say that while urbanism in Formative Mesoamerica has been recognized by some, a framework for discussing Formative period cities as a pan-Mesoamerican phenomenon has not been developed, or even attempted. More importantly, perhaps, scholars outside of Mesoamerica seem unaware of the extent of urbanism in Mesoamerica prior to the Classic period.

If our collective goal is to engage in the comparative analysis of first-generation cities, scholars of early urbanism must understand the nature of Mesoamerica's Formative period cities. Conversely, scholars working on early Mesoamerican cities must engage the rest of the world and draw upon theories, models, and data from comparative studies of early cities elsewhere. A first step, however, must be to explicitly address the scale and nature of these

cities through empirical studies that use a framework of comparative urban analysis.

Definitions of Urbanism?

It is traditional in an introduction such as this to provide definitions of cities and urbanism.

As Paul Wheatley (1972: 602) noted, however, definitions vary according to the interests of the scholar and are often adjusted so as to include all cases that a given author intuitively views as cities. For that reason, we should begin with Louis Wirth's (1938: 1) simple, yet elegant, statement that "cities are relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals." That statement can be paired with Wheatley's (1972: 601) view that urbanism is "customarily used to denote qualities possessed by certain of the more compact clusters of settlement features that at any particular moment in time represent centroids of continuous population movement."

Everyone agrees that cities are large and diverse settlements, but beyond that there is little consensus. A larger problem is that definitions are largely retrospective; most archaeological studies take definitions from the modern world and attempt to impose them on the ancient past. So anthropologists and archaeologists adopt models from the Chicago School (e.g., Park 1925; Wirth 1938) or the German School (e.g., Simmel 1950; Weber 1962), and ask whether ancient cities fit effectively into such schemes. We express surprise, disappointment, or confident self-congratulation when they do or don't, depending on our goals. The focus in this volume, by contrast, is forward-looking, in the sense that the chapters seek to understand the emergence of new ways of life during the course of the Formative period or how the emergence of cities changed the way people lived.

One goal of this volume is to debate how cities and urbanism should be defined in Formative period Mesoamerica. Beyond the basic criteria of relatively large and relatively diverse settlements, readers will find a lack of agreement among the authors. To be sure, providing definitions and evaluating data against them can be, at times, enlightening, as shown by Scott Hutson's (2016) work on Classic period Maya urbanism. At other times, however, it is better to be vaguely right than precisely wrong. Arbitrary thresholds can preclude the examination of instructive case studies and worthwhile comparative analysis. As Travis Stanton and Ryan Collins demonstrate in Chapter 5, the processes of place-making and of centralization, critical components of urbanization, can take place at many scales. The events that they discuss for Yaxuná, perhaps the smallest of the cities examined in this volume, are remarkably similar in concept to those of Teotihuacan, the largest addressed in this book (Sugiyama, Chapter 8).

As Yoffee (2005: 2) stated, the game of measuring cities against an arbitrary definition is a "relic of disco-era social theory." Early considerations of urbanism in archaeology focused on a limited set of traits against which a given settlement was judged as "urban" (e.g., Childe 1950). Despite the difficulty that archaeologists have in estimating population parameters, many scholars continue to adhere to absolute thresholds of population size or density (e.g., Gates 2003; Sanders and Price 1968; Sanders and Webster 1988). Proponents of such thresholds, however, disagree on where such levels should be set. Some argued forcefully for thresholds in the tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands. More recently, other scholars have argued that urbanism can be present at a much smaller scale, even under 1,000 people (M. Hansen 2008).

Criteria based upon density, following sociologists such as Max Weber (1962) and Wirth (1938), have been shown to be ethnocentric and premised on idealized European concepts of walled cities (M. E. Smith 2010a). In counterpoint, increasingly influential are definitions of dispersed urban settlement that do not require a high density of population but still involve large contiguous populations (Fletcher 2012). Roland Fletcher's model is particularly relevant to tropical climes, such as the lowlands of Mesoamerica, but for Formative period Mesoamerica it is also useful in understanding the first cities in temperate highland zones.

With both absolute size and density proving to be problematic defining characteristics, many recent approaches have focused more on the *process* of urbanization rather than on strict definitions of cities and/or urbanism. The continuum between early central places, especially economic centers, and large cities has long been recognized (Adams 1966; Algaze 2008; Blanton 1981; Sanders and Webster 1988), even by those who favor absolute thresholds for defining urbanism or cities. Michael Smith (2001, 2008a; Smith and Novic 2012), for one, has emphasized such functional criteria for urbanism, stressing central place activities that vary in scale and can be present in even small regional centers. In his view, villages, towns, and cities represent a hierarchy of urban forms that all serve central place functions. V. Gordon Childe (1950), too, saw that ancient urban settlements could have small populations, and that it was the degree of difference between settlements within a region that was important.

Another approach emphasizes urbanization as a process by which social relationships are transformed. Monica Smith (2003: 16) proposed that "the city form represents the physical manifestation of social transformation," but, she insists, social transformations cannot be matched precisely to a particular population size or areal extent. In this view, the social processes of urbanization often begin in relatively small settlements, even while some of them intensify as social scale increases. Arthur Joyce (2009: 192) expresses similar views: "Practices and the cultural and material conditions that constitute social

formations such as those that characterize different urban landscapes are always negotiations among differently positioned actors – socially embedded individuals and groups – distinguished by varying identities, interests, emotions, knowledge, outlooks, and dispositions."

Although it is impossible to find consensus in such diverse views, I believe that most scholars, including those in this volume, now view urbanism as a continuum that cannot be cleanly converted into a dichotomy of nonurban and urban. Many attempt to achieve clarity by decoupling "urban" from "city." This approach distinguishes function from size, using "city" to identify one and "urban" to identify the other (Hutson 2016; M. E. Smith 2001, 2008a; see also Christopher Pool and Michael Loughlin, Chapter 3, and Travis Stanton and Ryan Collins, Chapter 5, for overviews of the varying uses of the terms urban, urbanization, and city). Such semantic play may provide some clarity, but it robs us of using the adjective "urban" to describe the demographic aspect of cities and "urbanization" to describe the process of city growth. Many authors in this volume use "urban" in the functional sense to denote central places, but others do not. Julia Guernsey and Stephanie Strauss (Chapter 9) make good use of "urban" to derive "urbanity," a term that is both sonorous and enlightening; it would be lost if we insisted on limiting "urban" to denote central place functions. So long as an author's meaning is clear, there is no reason to impose a uniformity of language and definition on contributors to a volume such as this one.

The present volume was created with the hope that the chapters in it would stimulate a discussion of the nature of early cities in Mesoamerica, how they compare to other early cities around the world, and their relationship to later urban manifestations in Mesoamerica. The scholars taking part in this volume do not necessarily share a common viewpoint on these topics nor a single theoretical perspective. As I've already noted, they often don't share common definitions or nomenclature either. This diversity of opinions is welcome, because there is nothing more edifying than a good debate. George Cowgill (2004) urged us to "outgrow typological approaches and focus instead on degrees and kinds of urbanism," and this volume takes Cowgill's advice to heart.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF URBANISM AND URBANIZATION IN MESOAMERICA'S FORMATIVE PERIOD

Over the course of the Mesoamerican Formative period, mobile groups of presumably egalitarian hunter-gatherers became socially stratified city-dwellers with intensive systems of subsistence and robust economies of exchange. The structures of daily action, by which people interacted with one another and by which they defined their identities, were fundamentally altered (Love 1999a). Social inequality became pronounced, new crafts and trades came into being,

and increasing population densities affected the patterns of daily interaction. The intensification of long-distance trade undoubtedly exposed even the most sedentary of individuals to contact with people from distant territories.

The narrative of urbanization in Mesoamerica must begin with the establishment of the first villages. Each of the regional studies in this volume traces the development of urbanism from its roots in the Early Formative. It is the appearance of the earliest villages and the first use of pottery that define the beginnings of the Formative period (ca. 2000–1700 BCE for most regions). The end of the Formative is conventionally placed at about 250 or 300 CE but is no longer linked to cultural traits, such as the use of the Long Count calendar by the lowland Maya, a practice now known to have begun during the Late Formative and outside of the Maya Lowlands.[2]

In the functional sense (see M. E. Smith 2001, 2008a), the process of urbanization in Mesoamerica began with the establishment of early regional centers such as San José Mogote in Oaxaca (Joyce, Chapter 2), San Lorenzo in Veracruz (Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3), and Paso de la Amada in Chiapas (Love and Rosenswig, Chapter 7). As in other parts of the world, the full commitment to horticulture and sedentism eventually brought about both a significant increase in population and the development of economic surpluses that enabled social inequality to be manifested as differences in wealth.

The best evidence for the emergence of inequality and centralization during the Early Formative comes from the Pacific Coast and, in particular, the site of Paso de la Amada in the Mazatán region of Chiapas, Mexico. Covering at least 60 ha, the site had communal features, including the earliest documented ballcourt in Mesoamerica (Hill et al. 1998). A considerable amount of communal labor was invested in the construction of the ballcourt and other central buildings, which may be either elite residences or public structures. Paso de la Amada was both a sacred place and a political center, and is at present "the earliest known ceremonial center in Mesoamerica" (Clark 2004: 45).

In the latter half of the Early Formative, still larger regional centers arose. San Lorenzo, located in modern Veracruz, is generally accepted as the largest. Regional survey suggests that San Lorenzo may have been as large as 700 ha, although the density of population within that space is uncertain. The center of the site was a plateau covering 50 ha. San Lorenzo has been labeled by some as Mesoamerica's first city, and it is viewed by many as the point of origin of Mesoamerica's first "civilization," the Olmec (see, for example, Clark 1997). However, the role of San Lorenzo in relationship to the rest of Mesoamerica

[2] The Mesoamerican base-20 Long Count system measures the amount of time that has passed since a starting date of 3114 BCE. The earliest Long Count dates are found on monuments at Chiapa de Corzo in Chiapas, Mexico (Lee 1969: fig. 60) and at Tres Zapotes, in Veracruz, Mexico (Coe 1957).

remains contentious, and there is no doubt that by 1200 BCE emerging regional centers throughout Mesoamerica were interacting with one another economically and culturally.

In my view, the interaction of major centers and the widespread use of various materials in the "Olmec style" (Coe 1965a; de la Fuente 1973; Love and Guernsey 2008) represents the earliest establishment of a Mesoamerican "high culture" in the sense defined by John Baines and Yoffee (1998), and the instantiation of elite identities that cut across ethnic and linguistic boundaries. These patterns of social stratification and elite interaction were not uniform throughout Mesoamerica, but they represent the beginnings of the kind of "urbanities," or elite shibboleths, that Guernsey and Strauss (Chapter 9) propose.

The Middle Formative period in Mesoamerica was a critical juncture that saw the formation of large cities through more extensive regional aggregation. It was a time of incipient cities, with denser populations as well as larger overall settlement size. While settlements over 50 ha were rare in the Early Formative, there are many Middle Formative centers over 100 ha. The area of monumental architecture at La Venta, Tabasco, for example, covered 2 km^2 at its peak and, with areas of habitation included, may well have extended over 4 km^2 (Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3). Teopantecuanitlan in Guerrero, Chalcatzingo in Morelos, and Tres Zapotes in Veracruz were all well over 1 km^2 (Pool 2007; Pool and Loughlin, Chapter 3). La Blanca, on the Pacific Coast of Guatemala, covered just over 3 km^2 (Love and Guernsey 2011; Love and Rosenswig, Chapter 7). Emerging complexity also is evident in the Maya Lowlands, as discussed in this volume by Marcello Canuto and Francisco Estrada-Belli (Chapter 4) and Stanton and Collins (Chapter 5), at sites including Cival in the Northern Petén (Estrada-Belli 2011), Yaxuná in Yucatan (Stanton 2012), and Ceibal in the Pasión River region (Inomata 2017). The authors of Chapters 4 and 5 propose that modified landscapes, especially in ceremonial architectural configurations known as E Groups – which are characterized by a long platform, oriented north to south, on the eastern side of a plaza, and by a pyramidal structure on the western side of the plaza (see Stanton and Collins, Chapter 5, Fig. 5.3 for the Mounds 5E-2 and 5E-1 E Group at Yaxuná) – promoted aggregation in the Maya Lowlands. From these beginnings, other late Middle Formative lowland Maya sites, such as Nakbé in the Mirador Basin (R. Hansen 2005, 2016), further demonstrate large-scale monumental construction, overall large size, and the dynamics of emerging urbanism.

During the Middle Formative, people engaged in new and expanded efforts to create culturally modified landscapes on a monumental scale. Public buildings reached new heights, quite literally, with construction of monumental temple pyramids at La Venta (Mound C-1) and La Blanca (Mound 1). Public spaces, especially plazas, became increasingly larger and we can speculate that plaza size was linked to population at those centers (Inomata 2006; cf. Ossa,

Smith, and Lobo 2017). Horizontal expressions of monumentality, or the construction of massive platforms and artificial plateaus, also characterized this era at some sites (Inomata et al. 2020; Reese-Taylor 2021; Reese-Taylor et al. 2018). As Guernsey and Strauss (Chapter 9) discuss, monuments, especially carved stone sculpture, became more numerous, but only at a handful of centers during the Middle Formative period. The monuments served place-making roles in these cities, and distinguished them from their hinterlands. They also communicated important messages about emerging social relationships.

The widespread construction of E Groups throughout eastern Mesoamerica is another sign of the materialization of shared ideas of place-making and community (for the distribution of E Groups in the Maya Lowlands, see Canuto and Estrada-Belli, Chapter 4, Fig. 4.2) (Doyle 2012, 2017). Disputes about where E Groups are found first (Clark and Hansen 2001; Inomata 2017) may obscure recognition of a shared history of city planning. The differences among regional centers should not distract from recognition of the emergence of many shared concepts, throughout Mesoamerica as a whole, of what a city should be. We cannot attribute the general trend toward settlement growth and centralization across Mesoamerica to purely demographic factors: there were many attractive forces – religious, political, and economic – which drew people together.

Although both the routes to Formative urbanism and the rates of urbanization varied, the trajectory of increasing social complexity and political centralization climaxed in the Late Formative period with the development of fully urban state polities in most regions of Mesoamerica, before upheavals at the end of the Formative period ended the cycle. Nonetheless, there was significant variation in how these Late Formative polities were constituted. In some regions, such as the Soconusco, Oaxaca, and the Maya Lowlands, there are signs of decidedly hierarchical relationships and the emergence of forms of rulership that endured into the Classic period. In other cases, such as Tres Zapotes in Veracruz and Río Verde in Oaxaca, there are signs of competitive dynamics that mitigated highly centralized forms of government.

Late Formative cities were both larger and more numerous than those of the Middle Formative, occurring over a wide extent of territory that stretches throughout the geographic boundaries of Mesoamerica, from Central Mexico to modern-day El Salvador. Those cities were diverse in their organization, their political basis, and their longevity. In some areas, city plans follow a common template across broad regions. The incorporation of triadic groups in lowland Maya sites is one example. In Veracruz, the Standard Plan, originally defined by Annick Daneels (2002) for the Classic period, appears at many sites by the Terminal Formative (Pool and Loughlin Chapter 3). On the Pacific Coast, as discussed by Love and Robert Rosenswig (Chapter 7), variations on a common site plan appear throughout much of the Soconusco, and share