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The Late Prehispanic Economy of the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico: Weaving Threads from Data, Theory, and Subsequent History

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THE LATE PREHISPANIC ECONOMY OF THE VALLEY OF OAXACA, MEXICO: WEAVING THREADS FROM DATA, THEORY, AND SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

Gary M. Feinman and Linda M. Nicholas

ABSTRACT

Purpose – A reevaluation of the theoretical underpinnings that have been used to interpret the prehispanic highland Mesoamerican economy, with a primary focus on the Classic and Postclassic periods in the Valley of Oaxaca.

Approach – Models of prehispanic Mesoamerican economies have long been derived from theoretical constructs broadly associated with Marx’s Asiatic mode of production, specifically the writings of Wittfogel and Polanyi, which emphasized centralized control of irrigation and managed systems of production and distribution. Yet, for the Valley of Oaxaca, ethnographic data point to smaller-scale, more flexible systems of production, the importance of market exchange, and mechanisms for domestic cooperation. Drawing on residential excavation data from three...
Classic-period sites, systematic regional surveys, and other sources, the authors find that the data from the prehispanic era conform much more closely to the ethnographic findings than the long-standing theoretical constructs. New directions for modeling the prehispanic highland Mesoamerican economy are outlined.

Findings – The chapter’s empirical focus is on the Classic-period domestic economy in the Valley of Oaxaca, where many households engaged in multicrafting and produced nonsubsistence goods for exchange. The archaeological data do not support the long-held view that most domestic units were self-sufficient.

Originality/value – The chapter draws on and synthesizes the theoretical implications from decades of field research by the authors. The findings provide a basis to question traditional perspectives on prehispanic Mesoamerican economies that have guided research for decades but no longer are supported by empirical findings.

Keywords: Highland Mesoamerica; Valley of Oaxaca; economy; marketplace exchange; craft production

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

We explicitly approach this investigation of an ancient economy from two directions – first, from the top-down in reconsidering and questioning key theoretical perspectives that have been used to understand prehispanic Mesoamerican economic practice, and second, from the bottom-up in drawing on our more than 30 years of archaeological research, and the findings of many others, that are relevant to the Classic and Postclassic periods in the highlands of Mexico and, most specifically, the Valley of Oaxaca. Our analysis is grounded in the tenet that to understand a society (and how it changed over time) you must have basic information about its economy. At the same time, it is firmly centered in our belief that, based on new empirical and theoretical knowledge, revision is necessary to the perspectives on the ancient Mesoamerican economy, and specifically the later prehispanic Valley of Oaxaca economy, that were framed in the writings of such influential theorists as Marx (1971), Wittfogel (1957), Polanyi (Polanyi, Arensberg, & Pearson, 1957), Wolf, and Palerm (Palerm & Wolf, 1957) and others. Although the key theoretical tenets that inspired our thinking and
research represented an important turning point for the discipline decades ago, the research that was stimulated by this framework has, in turn, shown those basic conceptual underpinnings to be untenable. Given the broad scope of the topic we consider and the space available, we cannot make a complete statement, nor would we attempt a final one. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing new data observed at several scales of analysis with some long-held theoretical questions, we hopefully can offer new insights and perspectives on prehispanic Mesoamerican economies that will allow us to conceptualize and understand the long-term histories of these societies more clearly.

The study of prehispanic Mesoamerica, particularly highland Mesoamerica, underwent a fundamental shift in focus during the mid-20th century. As described by Eric Wolf (1994, pp. 3–4), prior to World War II, “stress was laid primarily on … possession of literacy, scripts, and calendars, on … artistic accomplishments, and on the grandeur of … pyramids. But this enthusiasm for high culture carried with it no equivalent concern with how these societies sustained themselves economically, and managed their evident complexity politically.” Wolf, along with other intellectual giants, including Palerm, Sanders, and Armillas, ushered in new perspectives that not only gave greater theoretical focus to matters economic but asked questions such as how were political leaders sustained? No one can doubt that this post-World War II paradigm has spurred and framed a good deal of subsequent archaeological research in Mesoamerica, including studies of regional settlement patterns and residential excavations (e.g., Balkansky, 2006; Blanton, Kowalewski, Feinman, & Finsten, 1993; pp. 8–27; Carballo, 2011; Nichols, 1996; Sántley & Hirth, 1993; Wolf, 1994). Following the decades-long implementation of these studies, not only do we now know a great deal more about the prehispanic Mesoamerican world, but the empirical grounding for our debates is far more ample than was the case five to six decades ago. Our aim here is not to criticize the ideas of people (such as Armillas, Palerm, and Wolf) that we see as our intellectual ancestors, but rather it is to question and rework some of their presumptions based on new empirical findings that we now have in large part as a consequence of the foundation laid by their theoretical works.

**EARLY PERSPECTIVES ON THE ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN ECONOMY**

Early models of the ancient Mesoamerican economy relied heavily on the Asiatic mode of production (Marx, 1971), Polanyi’s redistributive economy
(Polanyi et al., 1957), and Wittfogel’s (1957) idea of hydraulic civilization (Isaac, 1993). Each of these approaches envisioned centralized, autocratic states that were directly monitoring and controlling economic production and exchange, which afforded their basis for rule. For many early adherents, following Wittfogel (1957), the management of irrigation systems was seen to promote the centralization of political power and economic control over production and distribution. In 1955, Palerm (1955, p. 39) opined: “we view the development of irrigation in the Valley of Mexico not so much as the result of many small-scale initiatives by small groups, but as the result of large-scale enterprise, well-planned, in which an enormous number of people took part, engaged in important and prolonged public works under centralized and authoritative leadership.” It was furthermore argued that states assumed primary economic control over production and distribution. For example, Carrasco (2001, p. 363) wrote “[a]ncient Mexico had a politically integrated economy. The government controlled the basic means of production, land, and labor, and accumulated the surplus in the form of tribute.” We reference Carrasco here as he formulated some of the most explicit discussions of the economy for Mesoamerica and amplified this general theoretical perspective with documentary accounts of the Aztec.

Two features of the economy stand out in the documentary sources on the Aztec. The first is diverse kinds of tribute or tax, a matter of great economic concern to the conquering Spanish as they wished to follow earlier practices and extract resources from the natives (e.g., Berdan & Anawalt, 1992). The second is marketing and markets, whose size and activity greatly impressed many of the Spanish chroniclers, some of whom were already familiar with the Mediterranean centers of European commerce. Díaz del Castillo (2003, p. 218) recounted: “we turned to look at the great market place and the crowds of people that were in it, some buying and others selling, so that the murmur and hum of their voices … could be heard from more than a league off. Some of the soldiers among us who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, and all over Italy, and in Rome, said that so large a market place and so full of people … they had never beheld before.” In contrast to the emphasis on markets, large-scale storehouses or granaries, though occasionally noted in passing, were not emphasized in 16th-century texts, nor did such facilities serve to feed the pillaging European invaders as they did in the Andes.

Integrating these documentary accounts into the general models advanced by Marx, Wittfogel, and Polanyi, Carrasco (2001) and others stressed the centrality of tribute and state control of production and exchange, while underplaying the role of markets. For example, Sanders, Parsons, and
Santley (1979) not only describe the Aztec economy as redistributive despite the vital role of markets but also question whether Aztec marketers had any concern with deriving profit. In general, prehispanic Mesoamerican markets have been viewed until recently as only trafficking in local, low-value goods, or as being a late prehispanic function of the Aztec empire and so not widespread in time or space.

Since the mid-20th century, most archaeologists have conceived of or modeled the ancient Mesoamerican economy as a redistributive or managed economy with both production and key modes of transfer centralized under political control. Whereas market exchange has been underemphasized in these discussions, tribute has been stressed and seen as a central driver of the economy (cf. Kowalewski, 1990, p. 54). This mid-century vision of the prehispanic Mesoamerican economy has endured for decades despite serious empirical and theoretical questions concerning the presumed catalytic role of large-scale irrigation in political change in ancient Mesoamerica (e.g., Baker, 1998; Kirkby, 1973; Lees, 1973; Offner, 1981a, 1981b). As early as the 1950s and 1960s, it became evident that not only was massive canal irrigation or large water control facilities geographically restricted in Mesoamerica (e.g., there is basically no evidence of it in highland Oaxaca), but where it was found (such as the Aztec-era Basin of Mexico), its construction was very late in the prehispanic period, well after the rise of states in most regions. Prior to the Postclassic, even in the Basin of Mexico, most empirically evidenced irrigation, such as small, temporary canals for floodwater farming, could have been built and maintained by small-scale cooperative arrangements (Doolittle, 1990; Nichols & Frederick, 1993; Scarborough, 1991, 2006, pp. 224–235; Spencer, 2000, p. 175). “Although canalization has been reported as early as 700 B.C … clear associations between the state and the construction and maintenance of water systems are not apparent until the Aztec Postclassic period (A.D. 350–1520)” (Scarborough, 1991, p. 128). Thus, given the preponderance of small-scale irrigation in Mesoamerica, it is more difficult to argue that the management of irrigation prompted the political control of the economy or the rise of political complexity in Mesoamerica (Butzer, 1996; Scarborough, 2006, p. 233).

And yet, with few exceptions, Mesoamericanists have clung to the presumptions that prehispanic states controlled production, that exchange occurred mostly through centralized redistributive or tributary networks, and that most households were largely self-sufficient food producers, who were pulled out from that role only by political coercion or demographic stress. In other words, a key tenet of this long-held perspective is that
commoners or subalterns have little or no agency, autonomy, or economic rationality.

Based on these traditional mid-20th century models, we would expect that the prehispanic Mesoamerica economy was characterized by (1) little nonagricultural production in domestic contexts (self-sufficiency) and especially little variation from house to house in what was produced at each settlement or across a region, (2) the domestic production that is evidenced should be devoted to basic necessities, (3) high-status households should be managerially focused rather than craft producers themselves, (4) large centralized storage facilities should be present at politically important sites and in elite contexts as a basis for redistribution, (5) pooling or an even distribution of nonlocal goods from one house to another should be the rule given a reliance on redistributive transfers, and (6) market-based exchange should have relatively little economic significance.

In reality, since the 1960s and 1970s, a second perspective on the prehispanic Valley of Oaxaca economy has been outlined, but it has received less consideration in the archaeological literature. This perspective, less general in scope than the aforementioned theoretical schemes, grew out of ethnographic studies and analyses of rural economies in Oaxaca during the 1960s through the present and can be most closely associated with the works of Ralph Beals, his students, associates, and intellectual descendants (e.g., Beals, 1970, 1975; Cohen, 1999; Cook, 1970; Cook & Diskin, 1975). These ethnographic descriptions provide a very different picture of an economy than the command economy models. In contrast, the ethnographic accounts of mid-20th century Oaxaca emphasize small-scale agriculture, domestic craft production for exchange, heavy degrees of participation in the market, economic interdependence and cooperation between households both within and between communities (through customary practices such as tequio, guelaguetza, compadrazgo, mayordomía, and others), little household self-sufficiency, and considerable flexibility in economic occupation/pursuits (e.g., Parsons, 1936; Rees, 2006; Selby, Murphy, & Lorenzen, 1990; Vargas-Barón, 1968). Migration in and out of the valley to and from places near and far also characterizes these ethnographic accounts, as does the movement of people, following economic opportunities, within the valley (e.g., Kappel, 1977; Kowalewski, 2005; Murphy & Stepick, 1991).

Several points of clarification are in order regarding the observations of Beals and his colleagues. Although no formal model for the past was advanced, Beals clearly stated that he believed that some of his broad-based observations from the ethnographic present had important relevance for the prehispanic era (Beals, 1975, pp. 265–266). Also, we stress that in
constructing models from accounts of the ethnographic present to the past, we are neither advocating an application of the direct historical approach nor do we expect that any specific 20th-century institution had a direct parallel or analogue in the past. We recognize the great changes that have occurred in Oaxaca and Mesoamerica between A.D. 1520 and 1960 (e.g., Gibson, 1964; Taylor, 1972). Although we do not diminish the catastrophic and significant shifts that occurred with conquest, domestic production and market activities appear to have retained significant importance in Oaxaca during the colonial era (Baskes, 2005, pp. 192–193). Nevertheless, we also propose that certain economic pursuits often tend to have a better chance of working, providing sustenance in specific social, economic, and ecological contexts than the alternatives. Certain successful ways of life may be favorably remembered and so have a greater chance to become reinvented traditions or customs than others.

Kowalewski’s (2005) analysis of 3,500 years of demographic history in the Valley of Oaxaca highlights some examples of such practices, which correspond closely with Beals’ observations. For example, more open access to markets seems to correlate with rapid times of growth in the valley (Kowalewski, 2005, pp. 321–322), while the region’s population declined during the Mexican Revolution. This relatively sharp decline was not due to high numbers of war casualties but from being cut off from market networks (Kowalewski, 2005, p. 320). Likewise, following the Revolution, in those towns where land was distributed as smallholdings, demographic expansion was more rapid than where it was not (Kowalewski, 2005, p. 321).

Small-scale production, networks of cooperation, active participation in the market, economic flexibility, and household interdependence may be relatively resilient means to make a living in the Valley of Oaxaca, where temporal and spatial diversity in climatic cycles, resource distributions, and agrarian opportunities are all rather marked.

NEW RESEARCH

As a direct outgrowth of the fieldwork focus that was generated in archaeology by the new theoretical approaches of the mid-20th century, we now have a much stronger empirical record on which to evaluate these contrasting expectations. In this discussion, we draw most heavily on the research that we have codirected in the Valley of Oaxaca and focused on the Classic period (ca. A.D. 200–900) (Table 1). But many of the basic findings that we present do not seem out of line with what we know about other
regions of highland Mesoamerica during the Classic and Postclassic periods. We also believe that some of the basic economic fundamentals that we argue for the Valley of Oaxaca Classic period would apply to the Postclassic (A.D. 900–1520) in the region as well, although we return to the issue of key changes/differences later in the chapter.

We began our decades-long archaeological investigations in the Valley of Oaxaca on regional settlement pattern survey crews (Blanton, Kowalewski, Feinman, & Appel, 1982; Feinman & Nicholas, 1990; Kowalewski, Feinman, Finsten, Blanton, & Nicholas, 1989) that systematically walked over and recorded sites across this extensive valley. More recently, we have directed Classic-period household excavations at three sites, Ejutla, El Palmillo, and the Mitla Fortress (Fig. 1); at the latter site the residential occupation extends into the Early Postclassic period. Before discussing findings from these excavations and the issues outlined, we provide a brief background on the Classic-period Valley of Oaxaca.

### BACKGROUND TO THE VALLEY OF OAXACA

The Valley of Oaxaca is the largest expanse of flat land in the southern highlands of Mexico. The valley floor, ringed by mountains, surrounds the Atoyac River and a major tributary, the Salado River. The valley is divided into three major arms or branches. The region has a semiarid climate and rainfall today in many parts of the region is close to the minimum amount

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**Table 1.** Chronology for Prehispanic Mesoamerica and the Valley of Oaxaca.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AD/BC</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Late Postclassic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Early Postclassic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>Late Classic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>Early Classic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Terminal Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>Late Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Middle Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>Early Formative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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necessary to grow maize. Rainfall is patchy, varying markedly in both time and space.

During the Classic period, hilltop Monte Albán, situated at the center of the Valley of Oaxaca’s three arms, was the region’s largest settlement with a far greater volume of monumental construction than any other community in the area (Blanton, 1978; Blanton et al., 1993). Monte Albán’s size, architectural grandeur, record of carved stones (several exhibiting the capture of adversaries), and central location have prompted most scholars to envision the settlement as the region’s capital until near the end of the Classic period (ca. A.D. 700–900) when its power began to wane. The specific manifestation, however, of Monte Albán’s rule, revenues, and relations with outlying sites during this era remain sketchily evidenced and under debate. Nevertheless, based on a web of hilltop terrace sites that encircle much of the region (Feinman & Nicholas, 1990, 1999; Kowalewski et al., 1989) and a distinct ceramic complex that includes both the iconic Zapotec urns (Caso & Bernal, 1952) and a very high proportion of reduced-fired graywares that are not common in other highland regions (Caso, Bernal, & Acosta, 1967; Feinman, Banker, Cooper, Cook, & Nicholas,
there appears to have been more connectivity within the Valley of Oaxaca than with areas outside for much of the Classic period. Since the early 1990s, much of our research has turned to house excavations undertaken first at Ejutla, in the valley’s southernmost extension, then at El Palmillo (where we have the largest sample of residences), and most recently at the Mitla Fortress. The latter two sites are situated in the dry eastern arm of the valley. At El Palmillo, the Mitla Fortress, and a third site, Guirú, we also conducted intensive site surveys, during which we devoted more time to clearing and mapping than was possible during the regional-scale research (Feinman & Nicholas, 2004). Our multiscalar vantage on this highland valley, its component communities, and domestic units not only provides multitiered foci on the economic practices but also yields a holistic, as opposed to strictly elite, perspective on this prehispanic society.

EMPIRICAL CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL PERSPECTIVES

With the two overarching frameworks outlined, we now review empirical findings that led us, research project by research project, to bump against and challenge the expectations of the Asiatic/command economic model as considered for the Classic-period Valley of Oaxaca and more broadly for prehispanic Mesoamerica. We do not proceed, point by point, through each of the expectations outlined (Table 2). Rather we follow the stream of our investigations. That is, we review the evidence and analytical interpretations that led us to question and ultimately see the basic unsuitability of the command model (and the potential utility of the studies of Beals and other ethnographers) as we conducted a multiyear sequence of archaeological field

Table 2. Expectations of the Command Economy Model.

1. Little nonagricultural production in domestic contexts (self-sufficiency); little variation in production from house to house in each settlement or across a region
2. Domestic production devoted to basic necessities
3. High-status households managerially focused
4. Large centralized storage facilities at politically important sites and in elite contexts as basis for redistribution
5. Pooling or even distribution of nonlocal goods among houses
6. Market-based exchange not economically significant
studies. Again, we see these broad-brush correspondences between the past and present, not as direct parallels or evidence of cultural or societal stability (both of which we know not to be the case) but as a basis to contextualize and provide a plausible foundation to compare with the archaeological findings.

**Systematic Settlement Pattern Surveys**

Based on systematic regional survey findings for the Valley of Oaxaca and its immediate surroundings, we, in conjunction with our colleagues, made a series of observations. (1) An examination of public architecture and site layouts revealed no indications of large storehouses or granaries at Monte Albán or other large sites, even though we had mapped many mounds and platforms of various kinds at more than 100 sites. (2) There was no indication of the pooling or centralized redistribution of goods centered at Monte Albán. Samples of one exotic material that can be sourced, obsidian, indicate that different sources (and proportions of the material) were procured at different sites (Fig. 2). For example, in an analysis of Classic-period sites with at least 10 pieces of sourced obsidian, we found that the most abundant source at Ejutla, Ucareo (Michoacan), is almost absent in a large sourced obsidian sample from Monte Albán. The inhabitants of Ejutla likely had their own networks through the coast to procure this West Mexican obsidian. The specific patterning of obsidian at Monte Albán is not matched at any other site. In addition, given the hilltop and peripheral location of many of the large Classic-period sites in the valley, any model in which goods flowed in and out of just a few central places, such as Monte Albán, seems rather unlikely.

At the same time, although some craft activities, such as ceramic production, spinning, and stone working, were practiced at Monte Albán, the material residues of such economic practices were recorded at many other settlements as well, large and small (Fig. 3). These surface data provided early, preliminary evidence that more goods were circulating in the region than many had suspected (craft activities were not limited to Monte Albán or even large sites) and that it would be difficult to centrally manage or control such dispersed production (Feinman, 1997). We also carried out a number of analyses at various scales to examine the diachronic relationship between settlements and agrarian resources (land and water) (Nicholas, 1989). These investigations are based on a series of assumptions and calculations about ancient maize yields, rainfall variability, and labor
practices (Kirkby, 1973; Kowalewski, 1980, 1982), so they provide more general parameters rather than precise predictions. Yet even when all the assumptions were stacked toward self-sufficiency, they yielded support for the observation that basic goods, even foodstuffs, likely were exchanged in quantity during the Classic period. Based on the survey findings, we were beginning to doubt that most Classic-period Oaxaca households were largely self-sufficient. Rather, specialized production was widespread, and
Fig. 3. Distribution of Prehispanic Specialized Activities Recorded During Systematic Regional Surveys in the Valley of Oaxaca.
these goods circulated between sites in the region, making centralized control over production and distribution unlikely, particularly given the transport technologies available, the virtual absence of large-scale centralized storage facilities, and the basic nature of even household storage (as the bell-shaped pits described for Formative-period Mesoamerican villages [Flannery, 1976] are not a typical part of Classic-period domestic units).

**Household Excavations in Ejutla**

In the early 1990s, we began excavations at the edge of the contemporary community of Ejutla, in an area where we had found anomalous quantities of marine shell on the surface (Fig. 4; Feinman & Nicholas, 2001). There, we unearthed a Classic-period house and associated exterior space. Although we suspected that this rare finding (numerous pieces of surface shell) would relate to craftwork, we did not expect that it would be linked to domesticscale production, which it was (Feinman, 1999a; Feinman & Nicholas, 2000). We recovered few finished shell ornaments, even in a domestic tomb associated with the house, so that most finished shell pieces likely were exchanged. Most of the more than 20,000 pieces of marine shell that we recovered were blanks or debris. We also found that this same household engaged simultaneously in ceramic manufacture (including figurines) and some lapidary work, thus documenting not only that specialized production for exchange was occurring in domestic contexts as opposed to nonresidential workshops but that such craftwork was neither confined to basic necessities nor limited to a single craft activity per domestic unit (a practice we termed “multicrafting”) (Feinman & Nicholas, 2007).

The Ejutla findings led us to undertake a more thorough analysis of excavated craft production contexts throughout prehispanic Mesoamerica, and with very few exceptions these activities could clearly be localized to domestic contexts (Feinman, 1999a; see also Hirth, 2009). In retrospect, this should not have been surprising given how so much artisan production for exchange is still carried out in residential settings in Mexico and Oaxaca today (e.g., Rothstein & Rothstein, 2002).

**Household Excavations at El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress**

The limitation of the Ejutla finding was that we were able to excavate and study only a single residence due to the heavy sediment overburden and the
Fig. 4. Excavated Classic-Period Residence and Associated Midden and Firing Features at the Ejutla Site.
time that we had to spend to locate an ancient house with intact stratigraphic deposits. As a result of modern farming, some prehispanic houses in this sector of the site were destroyed. With these considerations in mind, we accepted the logistic challenges and began to investigate hilltop terrace sites in the eastern Tlacolula arm of the valley, first at El Palmillo, where we excavated eight houses (Fig. 5), and then at the Mitla Fortress, where we have examined three (Fig. 6). Although excavating on the slopes and tops of hills presents a range of challenges, the presence of residential terraces at these sites provides indications where the general perimeters of past household units were situated and so we can work more efficiently.

The house excavations at El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress have provided a firmer empirical basis to support key findings regarding nonagricultural production noted earlier at Ejutla. At El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress, we have recovered significant indications of nonagricultural

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**Fig. 5.** Map of El Palmillo, Showing the Location of Excavated Contexts.
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production in every house studied and multicrafting in many (Feinman & Nicholas, 2005). At these two sites, we have found evidence for fiber working (spinning and weaving) as well as chipped stone tool manufacture (Feinman & Nicholas, 2011a). Nevertheless, we observed different patterns between the house samples from the two sites (specifically obsidian working was more important at the Fortress, while textile and fiber working were carried out with greater intensity at El Palmillo).

In making comparisons among the excavated terraces at El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress, we assume that the domestic and craft-related debris

Fig. 6. Map of the Mitla Fortress, Showing the Location of Excavated Contexts.
found in association with structures and other contexts on each terrace primarily reflects activities carried out on or very near that terrace. The trash is most likely to have originated with the inhabitants of that residential complex or nearby households in the immediate vicinity (e.g., Bayham, 1996; Beck, 2003; Beck & Hill, 2004; Blinman, 1989). All the tables to follow include the complete counts of artifacts that we found on each terrace (associated with a specific domestic unit). Given the limited size of the terraces and their hillslope location, some refuse undoubtedly has been lost through erosion. Such processes would have affected all the terraces, and considerable quantities of debris remained on each terrace and in association with all the residential complexes. We also note that few, if any, subterranean pits were associated with any Classic-period domestic unit, and lime-plastered room floors were generally swept clean. Thus sample

![Proportional Representation of Each Bone Tool Type in Excavated Houses at El Palmillo.](image)

*Fig. 7.* Proportional Representation of Each Bone Tool Type in Excavated Houses at El Palmillo.
sizes would be minuscule, and much information disregarded, if we opted to depend exclusively on primary contexts.

Significantly, even within the same site, there was variation from house to house. For example, at El Palmillo, where we have the largest sample of residences, some houses had more bone weaving tools (battens) (Fig. 7), while others had more implements for spinning, especially spindle whorls (Table 3). At that site, we noted variation in spindle whorl sizes (see Parsons & Parsons, 1990; Parsons, 1972), which pattern into three groups by weight (likely cotton, fine maguey, coarse maguey) (Fig. 8). The distribution of whorls varied so that higher-status houses had more small whorls used for finer fibers and other houses were associated with the spinning of coarse fibers, likely maguey (Fig. 9, Table 4). Yet even nonelite houses had different proportions of whorls in the three size classes. Furthermore, at El Palmillo, one house engaged in obsidian tool production, while several others were associated with large quantities of chert debris, indicative of the working of that material, which is available on site (Haines, Feinman, & Nicholas, 2004). In some cases, we were able to document that the inhabitants of individual houses slightly altered their economic strategies over time.

Table 3. Distribution of Tools Associated with Cloth and Fiber Production in Excavated Houses at El Palmillo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tool</th>
<th>1162</th>
<th>1163</th>
<th>1147/48</th>
<th>925</th>
<th>507</th>
<th>335</th>
<th>St. 35</th>
<th>Pl. 11</th>
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<td><strong>Bone tools</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Awl</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Batten</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disk/spindle whorl</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Needle</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perforator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perforator/needle</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td><strong>Ceramic tools</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spindle whorls</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td><strong>Stone &amp; ceramic tools</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Raspador</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abrader</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinning bowl</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>
Overall, we have excavated 12 houses at three sites, and all were associated with some kind of nonagricultural production for exchange. Each house has a slightly (or very) different mix of activities, and in some instances these shifted over time. Every house we studied also included goods – both raw materials and finished products – that they could not procure locally (such as obsidian), or that were not manufactured by that household (such as ceramics in most cases). Even the faunal assemblages vary in significant ways at the three sites (Fig. 10). By site, there may have been differences in animal raising/procurement/acquisition patterns, such that dogs were more prominent at Ejutla, turkeys at the Mitla Fortress, and rabbits at El Palmillo.

Likewise, at El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress (where we have larger samples), we observed variation between certain houses as well. Most households produced a slightly distinct suite of goods and consumed products that they did not make, and so there was a considerable degree of domestic interdependence, both within a settlement and through networks that went beyond communities. There is little to support the long-held notion that prehispanic householders were entirely or even largely economically self-sufficient. We suspect that the Classic-period pattern was similar to that noted by Beals (1975, pp. 56–57) for more recent times, whereby only a small subset of goods, like maize, were produced in every
Fig. 9. Proportional Representation of Spindle Whorls of Varying Size in Excavated Houses at El Palmillo.

Table 4. Distribution of Spindle Whorls in Three Size Categories in Excavated Houses at El Palmillo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terrace</th>
<th>Cotton (0–8 g)</th>
<th>Fine Maguey (8–29 g)</th>
<th>Coarse Maguey (29 g+)</th>
<th>Unidentified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1162</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1163</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1147/48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>925</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>507</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>335</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. 35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pl. 11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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</table>
community, and no item was produced by every household. Valley communities had economic foci, but there was marked house-to-house variation within those settlements as well.

In addition, at El Palmillo, we excavated three high-status houses or palaces (Fig. 11). And two of those dwellings also were associated with numerous small spindle whorls for spinning fine fibers (see Fig. 9, Table 4). Thus even elite domestic units may have produced for exchange, and we found no indications of large-scale storage facilities or ample areas adjacent

*Fig. 10. Proportion of Major Animal Taxa in Faunal Assemblages at Ejutla, El Palmillo, and the Mitla Fortress.*
to houses to board numbers of unrelated attached specialists. Based on our findings, such widely dispersed production activities were unlikely to have been controlled directly by an overarching authority. We also have no empirical indication that palace dwellers engaged in economic management.

Given the degree of household economic connectivity and the evidence that goods were exchanged both between neighbors and longer distances, it seems likely that marketplace exchange, so significant in Mexico today and so vibrant at the time of Spanish Conquest, has a longer and more significant history across Mesoamerica than is generally presumed. As Beals

Fig. 11. High-Status Residential Precinct at El Palmillo.
Emerald Group Publishing Limited (1975, p. 266) wrote decades ago: “There is … reason to believe that marketing activity has existed in the Oaxaca region for a very long time.” In this regard, we have noted that Monte Albán (Blanton, 1978), El Palmillo, the Mitla Fortress (Feinman & Nicholas, 2004, 2010), and a number of other hilltop Classic-period sites each have open plazas near the bases of those settlements that were not associated with mounded constructions, but were adjacent to several paths or roads that came from beyond the settlement. The sizes of these plazas correlate with the sizes of the sites themselves during the Classic period. According to documentary sources (Pohl, Monaghan, & Stiver, 1997), 16th-century markets in Oaxaca were situated exterior to (or at the edges of) communities, descriptively paralleling these open plazas. Sixteenth-century accounts, as well as more recent discussions, also emphasize the complex interplays of different exchange modes, including marketing (e.g., Berdan, 1977, 1985; Garraty & Stark, 2010). We should stress that we are not denying the existence of tributary payments, which we know were part of Aztec and other late prehispanic economies including in the Valley of Oaxaca (e.g., Horcasitas & George, 1955). We also know that there were other political impacts and constraints (such as market judges and the ownership of land) on prehispanic highland Mesoamerican economic systems (e.g., Berdan, 1985, 2007; Carrasco, 2001) that likely varied in nature and intensity over time and space. Yet we do question whether we should envision tribute or centralized political control as having been at the core of (or the driver of) all prehispanic Mesoamerican economies as has been explicitly or implicitly implied for decades (Kowalewski, 1990; cf. Wolf, 1982, pp. 79–88).

TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING FORWARD

For Classic-period Oaxaca, none of the six expectations for the long-standing command model of the economy have been borne out. After all, many of the basic tenets of the Asiatic mode have been found wanting for Asia itself by O’Leary (1989), Thapar (1992), Morrison (1994), Brook (Brook & Blue, 1999), and others (e.g., Blanton & Fargher, 2008). And we suspect that most scholars would agree that hydraulic agriculture, despotic political practices, cheap modes of long-distance bulk transport, and high-yield farming were all less prominent in prehispanic Mesoamerica than in many parts of preindustrial Asia. These marked differences in basic technological and economic parameters weaken the theoretical logic behind this traditional frame’s applicability (with its emphasis on despotic rule, top-
down economic control, and domestic self-sufficiency) for understanding ancient Mesoamerica.

So how do we reboot our models and framing tenets? In Mesoamerican archaeology to date, we have been guided by two main conceptual paradigms, culture history and then the theoretical derivatives of the Asiatic mode (Wolf, 1994). Both of these theoretical frames focus principally on rulers or elites, rather than the ruled, and neither gives agency or any degree of autonomy to the lion’s share of the people. A broader consideration of larger segments of society seems overdue. But, in our opinion, nascent considerations of agency and resistance (e.g., Joyce, Arnaud Bustamante, & Levine, 2001) have often proven somewhat unconvincing, as they have not provided clear theoretical guidance as to why and how commoner agency becomes a cogent consideration. Rather, in these efforts, commoners tend to be afforded agency as a disruptive force only at certain times and not more generally. Often in these nascent efforts, the traditional model of commoner conformance is considered at work until there is evidence of a change or collapse, and then resistance is harkened. But why is the dynamic between different sectors of society only a force or factor then? And assuming that householders lack voice until things spin out of control ignores what we see as fundamental features of the economy in the Valley of Oaxaca and beyond, where householders, despite constraints, appear to have made economic choices and mobility decisions (see findings in Kowalewski, 2005; also Blanton, Finsten, Kowalewski, & Feinman, 1996).

Rather, looking at Oaxaca and highland Mexico in the recent past and present, we see fundamental elements of the Mesoamerican economy, outlined in ethnographic accounts decades ago, that also are broadly recognizable into the deeper past and should help frame our revised perspective. Nonagricultural production activities tend to be domestically situated. Such modes of production often entail both flexibility (e.g., multicrafting) and house-to-house interdependence (not self-sufficiency) as different households make distinct goods, which they then exchange. In Mesoamerica, domestic craft production goes back to the beginnings of sedentary life, and exchange of household-made goods was a key facet of the region’s dynamic throughout the prehispanic era (Flannery, 1976). Household economic interdependence/cooperation has long been important in highland Mesoamerica. Small-scale agriculture was the rule at most times and places, but in those rare instances in the past when larger, centrally managed water control systems were built (as in the Basin of Mexico), they tend to occur late, generally well after the emergence of states. Marketplace exchange was a key mode of transfer in Mesoamerica back to the Classic
period if not earlier (Garraty & Stark, 2010; Hirth, 1998). The great Tenochtitlán market and the Aztec marketing system did not rise without antecedents, and it has been illustrated that it was not just a late consequence of empire (Berdan et al., 1996; especially Blanton, 1996). Garnering empirical evidence for market exchange is not an easy archaeological assignment, but progress has been made over the last decade or so (Feinman & Garraty, 2010; Garraty & Stark, 2010; Hirth, 1998).

Significantly, both flexibility/variability in domestic productive practices, residential mobility, inter-household interdependence, and a reliance on markets entail cooperation and degrees of broad-based economic agency. Here, cooperation is used in its broadest sense as participation in larger socioeconomic networks. Following William H. Sewell, Jr. (1992, 2005), Mancur Olson (1965), Margaret Levi (1988), and Richard Blanton (Blanton & Fargher, 2008), inequalities in power can clearly be part of such networks, and so we should consider reframing the questions to ask why and how did Mesoamerican households migrate and aggregate, expand and contract their webs of economic and political networks, and shift their strategies of production and consumption in the face of different interests or governing regimes? One of the key questions that we might ask (rather than simply assuming the answer to be undifferentiated tribute), is in which ways did Mesoamerican polities accumulate revenues and how did differences in revenue generation relate (or not) to recognized variation in the nature of prehispanic Mesoamerican rulership and diversity in household economic practices? Framing the questions in this manner, as opposed to assuming top-down control and management, would give us the means to compare how economic practices and movement decisions varied in the face of shifting political-economic constraints and conditions.

Here, we return briefly to the changes and differences between the Classic and Postclassic periods in the Valley of Oaxaca (Feinman, 1999b; Feinman & Nicholas, 2011b). We suspect that many of the fundamental bases, such as small-scale production and domestic interdependence, of the Classic-period economy also apply to the Late Postclassic period as well. But there also were differences. We long have argued that marketing activities and the long-distance movement of goods (and people) increased in volume during the last centuries of the prehispanic era (Blanton & Feinman, 1984; Blanton et al., 1993; Kowalewski, Blanton, Feinman, & Finsten, 1983; Smith & Berdan, 2003). Changes in these flows also likely had effects on how (and how much) revenues were derived by elites from the rest of the population, thereby providing a theoretical basis for understanding some of the key differences and changes between the Classic and Postclassic periods in the
Valley of Oaxaca (e.g., Appel, 1982, 1986; Feinman, 1999b, 2007). For example, Late Postclassic caciques in Oaxaca may have derived greater proportions of their resources through long-distance exchanges and warfare (as opposed to agrarian production), allowing these leaders to maintain a greater portion of their wealth for their own households. The diminished dependence on commoner producers may help account for the much greater concentration of resources in Late Postclassic elite funerary contexts (e.g., Caso, 1969; Gallegos Ruiz, 1978) as compared to those of the earlier Classic period. During the former era, valley rulers may have been more dependent on local agricultural production for their revenues and so their reliance on local commoner populations was greater. As a consequence, elite-commoner differentials in wealth were somewhat dampened or depressed in the Classic period as compared to later, a difference indicated by the less elaborate burial furniture present in the earlier period tombs.

Shifting the tenets and questions that we use to frame our work on ancient Mesoamerican economies both builds on the productive research spurred by earlier paradigms and still provides us with necessary avenues to move beyond the contradictions that we presently face between a heavily top-down theory that appears out-of-sync with the emerging bottom-up domestic perspective that now helps gird the archaeological record for ancient Mesoamerica. Revising our theoretical frame also would enable us to restore degrees of agency to the populations that lived in this region during the deep past, while weaning us away from “our predilection for viewing the New World through Old World lenses” (Isaac, 1993, p. 463).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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