



Review Article

New perspectives on the early cities and states in Mesoamerica

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CLAUDIA GARCIA-DES LAURIERS & TATSUYA MURAKAMI (ed.). 2021. *Teotihuacan and Early Classic Mesoamerica: multiscalar perspectives on power, identity, and interregional relations*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado; 978-1-877812-97-2 hardback \$85.

MICHAEL LOVE & JULIA GUERNSEY (ed.). 2022. *Early Mesoamerican cities: urbanism and urbanization in the Formative Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-83851-1 hardback \$100.

The two edited volumes reviewed here provide up-to-date overviews of their respective topics in Mesoamerican archaeology: the development of the early cities in the region (*Early Mesoamerican cities*) and the ways in which one such city grew to influence or control a large portion of the region (*Teotihuacan and Early Classic Mesoamerica*). Both volumes were developed from SAA (Society for American Archaeology) conference sessions and—for better or worse—this remains evident in their internal variability in the definition of key terms and the lines of evidence presented in different chapters. Both focus on identifying and discussing the processes behind observed phenomena, rather than binary determinations of whether a given case was or was not a city, state or empire. Most of the chapters in both volumes also include significant quantities of data generated over the past 10–15 years, which provide important updates to traditional narratives. In the case of *Cities*, the influx of new data is largely driven by the explosive potential of LiDAR to identify landscape-level settlement patterns in lowland portions of Mesoamerica, and the resulting chapters are biased toward lowland cases. In *Teotihuacan*, much of the new information comes from a majority-Mexican list of authors, who work at sites in a broad range of locations across the country. Both volumes deftly avoid rehashing what have historically been the most visible debates on each of their topics: the Olmec mother/sister culture debate and the nature of Teotihuacan/Maya interaction, respectively.

Cities is largely organised around the two central questions of how early cities in Mesoamerica formed and what types of activities led to their persistence (or not). While definitions of ‘urbanism’ vary among chapters, they generally follow a functional definition, rather than one based on size or population thresholds. The initial chapter, by Love, provides overviews of approaches to the study of urbanism and of the development of urban settlements during the Formative period (c. 2000 BC–AD 300) in Mesoamerica, and the presentation of a set of reoccurring themes that crosscut the subsequent case studies. These themes focus on how Mesoamerican examples can contribute to the broader cross-cultural study of early urbanism and include: social diversity and organisation; cities as places of innovation; interaction

among settlements at various scales; and the relationship between cities and larger political units.

Chapters 2 (Joyce), 3 (Pool & Loughlin) and 7 (Love & Rosenswig) provide intra-regional and diachronic comparisons of the development of urban settlements in Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast and the Soconusco regions, respectively. For Oaxaca, the comparative cases are the Valley of Oaxaca, the Lower Rio Verde Valley and the Mixteca. For the Gulf Lowlands, the authors compare the urban trajectories of four settlements that collectively span the Formative: San Lorenzo, La Venta, Cerro de las Mesas and Tres Zapotes. The comparative cases for the Soconusco are the sites of La Blanca, Izapa, El Ujuxte and their respective areas of control. In all three chapters, the authors address the relationship between emerging centres and their hinterlands, the economic and ideological strategies of developing elites, and the non-linear and sometimes unsuccessful development of urbanism.

Chapter 4, by Canuto and Estrada-Belli, sets up a similar regional-scale overview of early urbanism in the southern Maya lowlands, while also presenting a historical overview of archaeological understandings of Maya cities and introducing key concepts that are echoed through several, more specific, Maya case studies in later chapters. These include the nature of low-density urbanism, the role of E-group architecture in early Maya urbanism, epigraphic work on the concept of *ch'een* (inhabited place) and the shift to a more diverse suite of elite-centred architectural forms later in the Formative.

The following chapter, by Stanton and Collins, provides a case study of these generalised processes at the site of Yaxuná. It traces the development of the site from an important, but non-urban, place in the landscape marked by an E-group during the Middle Formative, to an urban centre characterised by both increased population and inequality during the Late Formative—and its subsequent decline. In Chapter 6, Arroyo presents an overview of Kaminaljuyu in the Guatemalan highlands, drawing heavily on recent salvage projects that have excavated previously unstudied portions of the site. This work has demonstrated that the site was larger than previously known, internally heterogeneous, and featured a complex internal water management system.

Chapter 8, by Saburo Sugiyama on Teotihuacan, is a chronological outlier in the volume; while it provides a brief overview of the development of urbanism in Central Mexico, the bulk of the chapter is dedicated to the development of the Terminal Formative to Early Classic city. It provides a detailed construction history for the major monuments at the site, the arguments for a standardised measurement system, and the cosmological significance of the layout of the central zone of the site. Chapter 9, by Guernsey and Strauss, provides an art-historical counterpoint to the archaeological focus of the preceding chapters, looking at the way that monumental sculptures, and associated texts, created and reinforced the distinctiveness of urban centres and the power of their elites.

The final two chapters, by Monica Smith and Norman Yoffee, provide conclusions to the volume. Smith offers a primarily Mesoamerican summary, drawing together parallel lines of evidence on the integration of cities and surrounding landscapes, and the development of leadership from across the cases discussed in the volume. In contrast, Yoffee considers the development of Mesoamerican urbanism in a cross-cultural perspective, particularly the nature and definition of urbanism, and the ways in which the same things that draw people

to cities—novelty and diversity—can also be the fracture lines along which the same cities break.

On a technical level, the organisation of chapters lacks an obvious temporal or geographical arrangement, although chapters drawing heavily on similar themes have usually been placed together. While illustrations are black and white, most are either maps or images of stone monuments, where colour would provide little additional benefit.

Teotihuacan is organised geographically, moving from evidence of external relations found at the site itself through to progressively more distant sites and regions. The introductory chapter, by Murakami and García-Des Lauriers, provides a brief history of Teotihuacan, followed by a review of the different theoretical perspectives that have been used to interpret the city's interactions with Mesoamerica more broadly. It also lays out the volume's overarching foci on power, primarily Teotihuacan state power, and identity, primarily how people did or did not participate in a Teotihuacan identity.

The following two chapters focus on these themes for majority and minority groups at Teotihuacan itself. Murakami discusses four resources—greenstone, slate, cut stone blocks and lime plaster—that demonstrate different levels of elite control over their acquisition and distribution among the city's population. Gómez Chávez and Gazzola provide a counterpoint in their chapter on minority groups within the city, which describes the various immigrant neighbourhoods, the lines of evidence that have been used to identify them as such, and the ways in which the residents of these neighbourhoods balanced their homeland and adopted identities.

Chapters 4, 5 and 7 examine cases within Teotihuacan's inner zone of territorial control. Clayton uses ceramic analysis to contrast trade patterns in the southern Basin of Mexico during Teotihuacan's formation and height. While regional-scale exchange networks were well established in the region prior to the rise of Teotihuacan, the period under state control saw a significant increase in the volume of non-local ceramics, although the assemblage does not fully replicate types and associated practices at Teotihuacan itself. Holt-Mehta describes the results of recent work at El Tesoro in southern Hidalgo. This area has long been hypothesised to have been a significant colony of the Teotihuacan state, with an unusual degree of Zapotec influence. Holt-Mehta argues for a hybrid Zapotec-Teotihuacano identity at the site, more closely linked to the Oaxaca Barrio at Teotihuacan than to Oaxaca itself, based on the mixed ceramic assemblage and burial practices. Chapter 7, by Sugiura, Pérez and Jaimes Vences, provides an overview of the relationship between Teotihuacan and Toluca Valley—another area where there is good evidence for direct Teotihuacan control. The chapter focuses on the role of ceramics in identity construction both in the local imitation of and divergence from established state styles.

The discerning reader may have noted that I skipped past Chapter 6. This chapter, by Plunket and Uruñela, addresses the relationship between Teotihuacan and Cholula, the two largest contemporaneous sites in Central Mexico. It argues that while the two sites developed from a shared cultural base and saw substantial ongoing interaction, differences in public architecture, art and ritual objects indicate that the latter site was politically independent of the former. Chapter 8, by Saint-Charles Zetina and Fenoglio Límon, presents the results of recent work at the Teotihuacan colony site of El Rosario in Querétaro. This work has provided information on the reorientation of an original Chupícuaro-associated population

toward Teotihuacan with the construction of El Rosario, details on the multiple phases of construction of the site's main monumental complex, and the presence of distinctly Teotihuacan-style termination rituals prior to the site's abandonment by Teotihuacan groups.

The following two chapters examine areas that were probably not directly controlled by Teotihuacan, but remained heavily influenced by it, particularly as a source of prestige goods and ideological concepts. Chapter 10, by Filini, nominally focuses on Teotihuacan influence in West Mexico, but also provides comparative information on Teotihuacan influence in a range of other regions. While Teotihuacan sought access to distant resources, Teotihuacan influence, particularly as prestige goods—which include locally produced copies and modifications of Teotihuacan styles—extend beyond the areas where there is evidence for direct interaction with Teotihuacan, and likely carried local meanings. Unlike in the Maya area, there is little evidence for Teotihuacan-influenced objects in West Mexico continuing in use after the collapse of Teotihuacan itself.

Chapter 11, by García-Des Lauriers, presents the case of Los Horcones and the surrounding Soconusco coast, where many major sites show variable degrees of Teotihuacan influence. Los Horcones was a gateway community, connecting Central Mexican and Pacific Coast trade networks, and local elites used imported objects, local copies and local innovations (such as stelae with Teotihuacan imagery) to demonstrate their ties to Teotihuacan. The final chapter of the volume, also by García-Des Lauriers, summarises the preceding chapters and other relevant research on the themes of identity, interregional interaction and state power.

On a technical level, the volume is well illustrated, although the rationale for which figures are reproduced in colour is sometimes idiosyncratic. There are a few cases of flipped captions, and some of the charts rely on the reader having a prior understanding of display conventions for particular technical analyses.

These two volumes provide valuable overviews of both their focal topics—the nature and origins of urbanism and the organisation of state building within and beyond political boundaries—and of their respective periods of Mesoamerican history. As such, they will be of interest to both topical and regional scholars. Both volumes would also be appropriate for graduate-level classes, although supporting introductions to the region would be needed for those students not already familiar with Mesoamerica.