

THE MESOAMERICAN WORLD

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ANCIENT MESOAMERICA: A COMPARISON OF CHANGE IN THREE REGIONS. By RICHARD E. BLANTON, STEPHEN A. KOWALEWSKI, GARY M. FEINMAN, and JILL APPEL. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982. Pp. 300. \$29.50 cloth, \$11.50 paper.)

RITUAL HUMAN SACRIFICE IN MESOAMERICA. Edited by ELIZABETH H. BOONE. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1984. Pp. 263. \$18.00.)

HIGHLAND-LOWLAND INTERACTION IN MESOAMERICA: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES. Edited by ARTHUR G. MILLER. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1983. Pp. 263. \$18.00.)

SUPPLEMENT TO THE HANDBOOK OF MIDDLE AMERICAN INDIANS. Volume 1: ARCHAEOLOGY. Edited by JEREMY SABLOFF. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982. Pp. 463. \$55.00.)

Mesoamerica was a social system. It was, to borrow from Immanuel Wallerstein, a world-system, meaning that its destiny was largely self-defined, and to its participants it represented all the world they wished to care about.

Ancient Mesoamerica (p. 245)

To call Mesoamerica as a whole “a civilization” is to underscore the common needs and values of its peoples: a consensus sustaining a dynamic, creative, and often violent interplay of competing cultures and governments. How important was Mesoamerica to the development of the local civilizations of highland Mexico, Oaxaca, the Gulf Coast lowlands, and the Maya region? Despite their interest in the social, economic, and political interaction of these societies, Richard Blanton and the coauthors of *Ancient Mesoamerica* regard the local regions as the prime sources of determination. Their emphasis on local diversity born of local and regional conditions is warranted, for three millennia of intensive interaction between regions failed to reduce it significantly. But the whole premise of the volume Arthur Miller edited on highland-lowland interaction is that the connections were vitally important in shaping local destinies—not just economically, but in all facets of life. Elizabeth Boone’s edited volume on human sacrifice highlights the paradox, for here a shared belief in the efficacy of “ritual murder” (a

term used by Munro S. Edmonson, p. 91) manifests itself in a variety of religious contexts and creeds asserting profound differences in worldview. The new supplement to the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* displays the wealth of information on ancient Mesoamerican centers and regions that scholars have unearthed over the last two decades. Yet advances in the field have not resolved the problem but have succeeded instead in complicating it in intriguing ways.

Although *Ancient Mesoamerica: A Comparison of Change in Three Regions* is aimed at a lay audience, it is actually a theoretically ambitious and stimulating application of “systems” analysis to the evolution of complex society in this area. The three vectors against which the authors intend to measure change are scale, integration, and complexity, all of which gauge relationships between the parts making up social systems. This approach has a number of inherent advantages over alternate means of explaining the past. In the first place, Blanton and his colleagues usefully avoid polemical discourse on the primacy of any particular initial or enduring conditions as causes of social change. Consequently, social hierarchy, central places, and political and economic institutions all display distinctive configurations in the three regions under scrutiny. These differences are firmly anchored in different settlement patterns, a source of information widely approved by archaeologists as reliably exhibiting social relationships. At the same time, however, settlement patterns reflect geographical conditions such as valleys, mountains, rivers, and plains; and the authors tend toward geographical determinism in explaining differences between Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, and the eastern (Maya) lowlands.

Blanton, Stephen Kowalewski, Gary Feinman, and Jill Appel argue that these three regions display significant differences in the elaboration of political institutions relative to economic and social institutions. They observe, “It is apparently difficult for strong states to emerge in areas serviced by already complex and horizontally integrated commercial institutions, just as autonomous commercial institutions often develop only slowly in situations where integration is provided by powerful early states” (p. 234). The authors regard the lowland Maya as illustrative of the former condition, while the highland valley societies of Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico evince the latter. They underscore this view in several discussions in the book: “Chiefdoms and states in the eastern lowlands tended to be unstable and often weak. Chiefdoms and traditional states almost everywhere are notoriously unstable, especially as regards succession to office. Maya polities had those problems too, but there are also indications of substantial discontinuity in territory, administrative structure, and administrative capitals” (p. 220).

This highland-lowland contrast, although couched in impartial

terms as an illustration of evolutionary variability, betrays a certain perplexity on the part of many archaeologists when they are required to explain the nature and function of the Maya state. The problem is not with the material data. The Maya had several major centers that endured just as long as Monte Alban in Oaxaca and others with public monuments that comfortably rival those of Teotihuacán in Mexico. The problem is simply that the Maya region had no single central state. In this respect, the civilization truly differed from those in the highland regions discussed by Blanton and his colleagues. It does not follow from this fact, however, that the Maya states that arose were smaller, weaker, or less complicated. The irony of this situation is that Mayanists know a great deal more about the political organization of these people than is known about the contemporary highland societies.

The Maya were a literate people who left textual discussions of their dynastic histories, with allusions to war, vassalage, alliance, and nobility couched in elaborate definitions of power. Hence Mayanists can discern not only how Maya statecraft worked but also how particular solutions to particular political problems fared over the long term. The absence of a prime hegemonic center must be balanced against the presence of a single structure of power replicated in every center for which textual evidence exists over an area of some eighty thousand square kilometers. The remarkable cultural, linguistic, and social integration of the Maya throughout such a large region as found in the eastern lowlands sustained an equally remarkable political integration. To be sure, individual centers rose, declined, and rose again, but they did so within a political ethos that was evolving at the regional level.

It is an additional irony that Blanton and his colleagues recognize that the regional cultural integration of the lowland Maya is an adaptation to the Mesoamerican world that occurred well before the advent of the civilized phase of their society, a society compensating in scale for what it lacked in centrality in the face of more vertically organized, predatory neighbors. Having achieved this important insight, Blanton and his colleagues should not be surprised to find that the Maya state was inherent to the totality at the regional level and hence was not the product or expression of any single local polity or community.

In the last analysis, the authors of *Ancient Mesoamerica* succumb to a qualitative evaluation of state formation in their three regions that reflects a single scale—primate capital organization—according to which the lowland Maya must come in a poor third to their highland kin. Other scales, such as the sophistication of communication systems, place the Maya state far in advance of their neighbors. Still others, such as the definition of rulership, reveal a profound gap between the Maya god-kings and their anonymous counterparts in the basin of Mexico. Multiple scales reveal not only the environmental and social aspects of

diversity but also the cultural aspects; it is a diversity evincing many paths toward defining power and the state.

Highland-Lowland Interaction in Mesoamerica: Interdisciplinary Approaches reveals a similar inclination toward placing Mesoamerica's regional societies on a single path to complexity. The thrust of this volume edited by Arthur Miller is found in papers by Robert Santley on Teotihuacán's obsidian trade, Clemency Coggins on Teotihuacán's cultural imperialism, and Marshall Becker on lowland Maya acculturation to the Teotihuacán state. Interaction between Mesoamerica's regional civilizations enhanced local trends toward complexity and diffused important social, political, economic, and religious tools for establishing and reinforcing hierarchy. More specifically, these papers explore the effects of Teotihuacán's dominance in Mesoamerica on the development of the lowland Maya civilization.

Other papers in *Highland-Lowland Interaction in Mesoamerica* are less inclined to describe the lowland Maya as primarily recipients of sociocultural innovation. Joseph Ball's discussion of ceramic interaction lays important methodological groundwork for useful future evaluation along these lines. B. L. Turner's review of agricultural technology suggests that lowland productivity was based on methods as advanced as those found in the highlands and probably as precocious, but distinctive and indigenous to the former environment. John Justeson, William Norman, Lyle Campbell, and Terrence Kaufman illustrate the central importance of linguistic analysis in monitoring interregional relations. But their preliminary work shows more important contact between Maya lowlands and the Guatemalan highlands in Preclassic and Proto-classic times than between the Maya and Mexicans in the Classic period. Jacinto Quirarte's paper on the spectacular murals of Cacaxtla focuses on the movement of Maya style and possibly artisans into the highlands of Mexico in the Late Classic period during the collapse of Teotihuacán. Nevertheless, the thematic heart of *Highland-Lowland Interaction* is the lowland Maya civilization and how it was influenced by other regional civilizations.

There are both empirical and theoretical problems with the position that the lowland Maya advanced to civilized status (or more specifically, redefined their political and religious statecraft) under the sway of Middle Classic Mexico. In particular, problems exist in the central hypothesis of Coggins's article, which holds that an important early ruler at the major Maya site of Tikal, Curl Nose, was a foreigner with strong Teotihuacán affiliations. This hypothesis pervades the Miller volume and is becoming a matter of historical fact in Mesoamerican literature. Hence it is worth reasserting the hypothetical status of this identification and suggesting an alternative interpretation of the data.

In terms of the hieroglyphic texts associated with Curl Nose on

the royal stone stelae numbered 4 and 31 at Tikal, no clear evidence exists to suggest that this man was either foreign or a usurper. On Stela 4, Curl Nose's accession monument, he acquires royal authority by taking the sacred bundle, a standard and orthodox lowland Maya statement. On Stela 31, erected by Curl Nose's son Stormy Sky, discussion of Curl Nose's activities as ruler of Tikal follows without comment or elaboration directly after the activities of his immediate predecessor, Jaguar Paw. It is now clear from ongoing work at Tikal that Curl Nose's reign directly followed that of Jaguar Paw (personal communication, Marisala Ayala). Stela 31 subsequently records the activities of Stormy Sky. This kind of genealogy is standard for the Maya royalty, and the fact that Stormy Sky's scribes made no effort to establish the legitimacy of Curl Nose relative to Jaguar Paw suggests that the issue is not in question.

A major glyphic argument has asserted that Curl Nose has a parentage statement on Stormy Sky's Stela 31 that refers to his father with the title Cauac Shield rather than as Jaguar Paw. This title includes the idea of a hand-grasping spear-thrower, which is thought of as a characteristically Mexican weapon. Hence it has been argued that this title refers to Curl Nose's father as a member of a foreign group. Curl Nose, however, did not introduce the Cauac Shield title on his own stelae, nor is he pictured on them as carrying a spear-thrower. Actually, the earliest presence of this weapon in the lowlands is on Stela 5 at Uaxactún (a site north of Tikal and subservient to it), a stela erected during the reign of Jaguar Paw. Hence the weapon is neither novel nor central to Curl Nose's own iconographic and epigraphic interests. Rather it represents the interests of Stormy Sky relative to his father on one of probably many stelae raised during his long and illustrious career. Other instances of the spear-thrower in Maya iconography suggest that it was part of a blood-sacrifice complex of rituals, as alluded to in a paper by Linda Schele discussed below. Such rituals were thoroughly embedded in Maya royal practice.

There is no reason to doubt that Curl Nose was an extraordinary and innovative ruler at Tikal with particular interests in cultivating foreign ritual and economic ties. His portraits on Stela 31 flanking Stormy Sky indeed display god images such as the goggle-eyed Tlaloc and other regalia attesting to Mexican affinities. Nevertheless, the primary icons worn and carried by Curl Nose on his Stelae 4 and 36 are the orthodox ones seen on both Jaguar Paw's and Stormy Sky's stelae portraits, namely the human and animal heads of the Sun—second-born of the ancestral Hero Twins of the Maya. Indeed, Curl Nose's name glyph is the front head of the Maya Celestial Monster, which is one of the aspects of Venus, the elder twin brother of the Maya Sun (Linda Schele, personal communication). Rather than attempting to impose some alien

religious or political ideology on his people, Curl Nose appears to have been interested in opening up an orthodoxy he thoroughly accepted to new outside liaisons.

The hypothesis that Tikal was taken over by Mexicanized foreigners warrants fairly detailed analysis for two reasons. First, it has stood essentially unchallenged for nearly a decade despite the fact that Maya writing, divine kingship, calendrics, and cosmology were all well established prior to contact with highland Mexico and persisted with little basic change following contact. Indeed, it would be most strange if inhabitants of Teotihuacán, who did not write, worship kings, or record calendrics, were to have originated major innovations in these features of Maya politics. Second, the notion of Mexican cultural imperialism obscures the genuine and exciting prospects of discovering what Mesoamericans themselves saw in interregional relationships through the ideas and images of a literate and self-reflecting people.

What the Maya saw in obsidian, for example, was not simply a superior glassy stone for making edged tools, nor can utility explain the high value placed on this material in the face of acceptable local alternatives such as honey-brown chert. Santley argues with some justification that control of obsidian tool production and distribution was a major factor in Teotihuacán's political power in Mesoamerica. Nevertheless, a lowland Maya distribution that was pervasive, enduring, and yet low-volume indicates that obsidian's value was other than utilitarian. "Human Sacrifice among the Classic Maya," the lead article by Linda Schele in Elizabeth Boone's ably edited *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* addresses this empirical issue among others. In general, Schele's effort is a brilliant and programmatic survey of the epigraphic and iconographic evidence on the Classic Maya view of sacrifice. In particular, however, Schele shows how obsidian can be phonetically, ideographically, and iconographically identified as a prime instrument of auto-sacrificial bloodletting among the Maya. As objects, obsidian lancets appear on royal regalia and in offering bowls filled with bloodspattered paper. When used as a verb, the Mayan word for obsidian instrument means "to let blood"; the same instrument can serve as a metaphor for the relationship between parent and child and as a verbal expression in the death sacrifice of captives. Ongoing epigraphic research identifies the centrality of bloodletting ritual in ancient Maya life beyond dispute. Ethnohistorical sources confirm the archaeological pattern of broad distribution of prismatic obsidian blades by describing bloodletting as the practice of the population at large. If the Maya data reflect practices elsewhere in Mesoamerica, then the interests of Teotihuacán in monopolizing the material—and those of the lowland Maya in guaranteeing its long-distance importation—are more comprehensible.

Schele's article illuminates not only the reasons why certain re-

sources were exchanged between regions in Mesoamerica but the ways in which the institutions spanning distinctive regional cultures and facilitating such exchange might have been organized. She identifies a complex of symbols associated with autosacrifice, war, and death-dealing sacrifice among the Classic Maya, a cluster that clearly signals inter-regional ties. Among these symbols are Tlaloc god masks, puffball helmets, Mexican year signs, chopped feather helmets, bunched throwing spears, and spear-throwers. Although the majority of lowland Maya examples come from Late Classic monuments (after the Teotihuacán-dominated Middle Classic horizon), the Early Classic Stela 5 at Uaxactún mentioned above shows the puffball helmet, spear-thrower, and garters of this complex. This stela suggests that the complex entered the Tikal area during the reign of Jaguar Paw and was subsequently favored and promoted by his successor Curl Nose. While the symbols associated with this complex traditionally have been identified with highland Mexico and Teotihuacán, the complex as a whole is much better represented in the Maya lowlands, where it is an integral feature of dynastic ritual.

Quirarte's article in *Highland-Lowland Interaction in Mesoamerica*, "Outside Influence at Cacaxtla," posits significant lowland input at the site of Cacaxtla, suggesting that the mural conventions are drawn from Maya vase painting. This location is one of several Late Classic or Terminal Classic sites in the highlands evincing Maya influence and displaying examples of the complex discussed by Schele. Other examples include the famous Maya-style relief figures at Xochicalco and the Maya-style stela at Tula. These highland sites are strategically situated to control communication routes. In the cases of Xochicalco and Tula, at least, trade and commerce are believed to have been primary functions of the cities. Ritual pilgrimage networks were well established in Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish Conquest and served to validate and sanctify trading missions over long distances. The distribution of the ritual complex discussed by Schele indicates that it may have served similar interregional functions.

Jeffrey K. Wilkerson's contribution to *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* also has implications for interregional contacts. In a formidable explication of the ball-court iconography at the Northern Veracruz Classic center of El Tajín, Wilkerson details the relationships among kings, people, and gods through death sacrifice, autosacrifice, and the consumption of pulque. An intoxicating beverage that had to be imported to lowland Veracruz from the neighboring highland regions (hence, like obsidian among the lowland Maya), pulque was a ritual necessity that could be easily controlled. One must assume that pulque's popularity in lowland rituals followed from its prior use in such contexts in the highlands and also from the prior existence of signifi-

cant ritual intercourse between these regions. The archaeology of Teotihuacán and El Tajín attests to significant connections between these regions. While highland commodities such as pulque and obsidian moved into the lowlands, other major ritual commodities such as cacao moved in the opposite direction.

Wilkerson's discussion of ball-game ritual and sacrifice also points out the dynamic and syncretic properties of these central and public interpretations of local culture. He suggests that the complex of actions and symbols displayed in the El Tajín ball courts registers the convergence of several distinct cultic practices and ideas in the Late Classic period. But in addition to such internal dynamism, comparing the Veracruz rituals with those of the lowland Maya or those of highland groups reveals kaleidoscopic variation in common facilities such as ball courts, common gods such as Venus, the sun, and rain, and common practices such as bloodletting from the genitalia. The conduits of novelty, long-distance pilgrimage and trade networks, gave Mesoamerica a broadly shared corpus of calendrics, supernaturals, and rites. Yet the manner in which these practices were expressed locally displayed the ability and strength of regional civilizations to transform the common into definitions of difference.

Other contributions to *Ritual Human Sacrifice in Mesoamerica* ably demonstrate such dynamics. Patricia Rieff Anawalt's work on Aztec ritual clothing documents the process of adoption and redefinition of foreign traits while underscoring the centrality of textiles, a major long-distance commodity, in ritual life. Betty Ann Brown's work on the historical antecedents of Aztec festivals shows the power and flexibility of public ritual as a means of continually reinterpreting the past in a manner designed to assure the righteousness of contemporary political and social institutions. Similarly, Matos Moctezuma's essay on the spectacular Templo Mayor of Tenochitlán emphasizes the connections of Aztec ritual life with the material base of the society in agriculture and conquest tribute. The material correlates of Maya heart sacrifice suggest to Robicsek and Hales that archaeologists have long overlooked the instruments and facilities preserved as evidence of such activity. Edmonson's description of Postclassic Maya sacrifice shows intriguing parallels with practices of the Classic period. Demarest's stimulating summary includes the suggestion that Classic Mesoamerican sacrifice was oriented toward individuals, while Postclassic societies evolved interstate competition that motivated mass sacrifice. For the reasons discussed above, sacrifice as a dimension of public ritual seems likely to have been an early and enduring feature of both local politics and inter-regional relations.

Both local and interregional developments are dealt with in the archaeology supplement to the *Handbook of Middle American Indians*

edited by Jeremy Sabloff with the help of Patrick Andrews. An overview of the volume by Gordon Willey is followed by two sections of articles. The first section comprises reports on major projects since the publication of the original *HMAI* volumes. These contributions include chapters on diverse topics: the Tehuacán Valley by Richard S. MacNeish; early occupation in the Valley of Oaxaca by Kent V. Flannery, Joyce Marcus, and Stephen Kowalewski; the great Olmec center of San Lorenzo by Michael D. Coe; the survey of the Basin of Mexico by William T. Sanders; Teotihuacán by René Millon; a survey in Tlaxcala by Angel García Cook; Tula by Richard A. Diehl; Tikal by Christopher Jones, William R. Coe, and William A. Haviland; and the northern Maya city of Dzibilchaltun by E. Wyllys Andrews V. While much of this material has been covered in book-length monographs or more focused compilations of recently published articles, these chapters are thoughtful synopses of complicated research. The contribution on Tlaxcala represents a major original report on a region whose role in Mesoamerican history was clearly more vital than heretofore supposed. In general, research reported in this compilation has served to sharpen focus on some problem areas while resolving others. The work on Tikal and Dzibilchaltun dispels any doubt that the lowland Maya were living in large and complex communities comparable to those found in the highlands of Mexico. At the same time, the Oaxaca research and the Basin of Mexico surveys have led to conflicting ideas over the presence or absence of a broadly shared set of conditions engendering urbanism. These articles also reveal a general trend toward emphasizing local or regional conditions in the rise of Mesoamerican civilizations, although several authors note the importance of trade between regions.

The second section of the archaeology supplement to the *HMAI* includes three topical syntheses. Barbara L. Stark's essay, "The Rise of Sedentary Life," is a welcome and substantive contribution to a difficult and somewhat scattered literature. Her lucid interpretations of the initial stages of human occupation stress the gradual nature of change and the systemic relations of many conditions moving societies in the direction of sedentism, domestication, and cultural elaboration. The question of why a Mesoamerica of village farmers emerged from the diversity of ecological circumstances in this area is a problem that Stark treats with understandable caution. On the one hand, she appeals to equifinality, the process by which distinct conditions can give rise to similar systems, or in the case of human beings, to similar social solutions. On the other hand, increasing evidence exists of interregional exchange as the village farming horizon is approached. That is, once domesticated crops were firmly in place, they and their concomitant social ways evidently spread rather rapidly.

The second topical essay, David Grove's "The Formative Period

and the Evolution of Complex Culture," is another thoughtful synthesis. Although by Archaic period standards, the move from villages to towns and temple centers took place rather rapidly (circa 2000–500 B.C.), Grove suggests that increasing field information has smoothed out many jumps in the record. He points to many localized and gradual transformations toward complexity. Offering something of an intellectual antidote to the popular notion that the Formative Olmec civilization was a "mother culture" to the other incipient complex societies of Mesoamerica, Grove downplays the significance of Early Formative styles in pottery and other materials that are most elaborated among the Gulf Coast Olmec but occur widely in Mesoamerica. Grove by no means opposes the idea that interregional interaction was generally a powerful stimulant to change. On the contrary, he documents major highland-lowland connections at Middle Formative Chalcatzingo and even points to suggestive connections between Formative Mesoamerica and Ecuador. Rather, as in the case of the lowland Maya discussed above, the matter is one of not only empirically weighing indigenous and external factors in the growth of complex society but also of identifying the institutional interface between these factors. As in the case of the Maya, the Formative institutions monitoring "foreign relations" employ an elaborating ritual technology that also serves to foster local sociopolitical integration.

In the last synthesis of the *HMAI* volume, "The Rise of Cities," Blanton briefly reiterates his evidence for distinctive evolutionary paths toward civilization operating at the regional or local level. On the face of it, there can be no doubt that the settlement patterns of the Valley of Oaxaca, the Basin of Mexico, and other parts of Mesoamerica contrasted in significant ways through time. No doubt the political and economic institutions of these civilizations differed as well. A regional level of analysis, however, clearly cannot account for the Mesoamerican world because the totality was not merely comprised of the parts. Rather, it actively conditioned them, as Blanton and his colleagues noted in *Ancient Mesoamerica*. Blanton suggests in his article that although Teotihuacán was a "repository of symbols," Monte Alban was not, and that while Teotihuacán was an economic as well as a political capital, Monte Alban was the political capital of a military confederacy. This separation of the religious, political, economic, and military is suspect. The sacrificial victims carved on stone slabs who are displayed early on at Monte Alban evince military activity to be sure, but sacrifice and war are inextricably bound up in religion and politics elsewhere in Mesoamerica. No clear evidence of disassociation exists at Monte Alban. Religion and politics, in turn, manifest themselves in institutions among the Maya and the Mexicans that engage in both local and interregional economic control. Granted that Monte Alban may not have

been a locus of production or even of exchange, its ritual activities were still central to control of these aspects, as Blanton and his colleagues explain in *Ancient Mesoamerica*.

Blanton and his coauthors call the Mesoamerican world an elite prestige system, by which they mean a system facilitating the outward display of power grounded in more local social and economic conditions. More than adjuncts to localized power, the commodities circulating in Mesoamerica were at once ritual necessities at many levels of society and likely currencies in local economic transactions as well if the societies of the contact period are a useful guide. In brief, the regulation of foreign trade was probably a critical adaptive condition in the development of local civilizations. Exchange was in turn contingent upon viable institutions regulating cultural contact and the flow of novelty from society to society. For the most part, these institutions appear to have been not the imperialistic product of dominant cultures but a syncretic expression of relatively autonomous ones. Once in place (beginning in the Initial or Formative period), these interregional ritual networks shaped as they facilitated the exchange of goods and ideas. The predomination of some images or ideas in these networks, which were Olmec, Mexican, or Maya at different times, may register universality rather than dominion. Moreover, prior to the Aztecs' harnessing conquest warfare to these networks, they and the Mesoamerica they defined may have been as autonomous as the civilizations they embraced.