
Migrations in Late Mesoamerica

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This volume gathers scholars from different disciplines to address the role of migration during the most tumultuous centuries of Mesoamerican prehistory (500–1500 CE). Ethnohistoric, linguistic, biological, and archaeological data coupled with visual imagery and hieroglyphic texts associate the final millennium of Mesoamerican prehistory with political, economic, and social changes that often unmoored populations from ancestral lands. Some of these processes are associated with the peak of political activity of Classic period centers such as Teotihuacan or Monte Albán. Soon afterward, Mesoamericans experienced climate change, human impacts on the environment; the fall of Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and many Maya cities; the rise and fall of many of their successors over just a few centuries; and changing political ideologies and the artistic programs that expressed them. Surviving pictorial and written accounts detail the founding of new centers in Central Mexico, the Mixteca, Yucatan, and the Guatemalan highlands. Although independent investigations into these topics have repeatedly discerned the movement of social groups at their core, migration itself has rarely been the central focus of theoretical analysis. The ongoing rehabilitation of migration as a subject for study now allows prehistorians to reexamine its relationship to other areas of social life. In this volume, selected representatives from archaeology, biological anthropology, linguistics, ethnohistory, epigraphy, and art history present contributions on the dynamics, causes, and impacts of migration; indigenous perceptions of migration; and the methods and assumptions we use when identifying or analyzing our specific cases.

The goal of this volume is to enhance our understanding of the occurrence and significance of migration in the millennium preceding that most consequential migration of all—the European encounter. No one seeks to

bring back migration as a *deus ex machina* explanation for culture change. Yet it is apparent that social groups are frequently willing or forced to migrate for many disparate reasons and that the social and material consequences are similarly varied. Against the background of archaeology's shift toward agency and the flexibility of social relations, long-term demographic continuity should not be treated as a given (Fowles 2011; Morrissey 2015). From this perspective, the comparative stability of the Classic period is in equal need of explanation. Centers such as Teotihuacan, Monte Albán, and the Maya city-states, which were occupied for up to 1,000 years or more, represent deliberate efforts at place-making and demographic capture and manipulation. Their decline released their vast populations to transform governance, social organization, and economy.

Recent multidisciplinary studies (Arnauld et al. 2019; Cabana and Clark 2011a, 5; Garcia and La Bras 2017; Tsuda et al. 2015, 19) have concluded that migration has certain characteristics that together distinguish it from everyday forms of human mobility (Van Dommelen 2014). First, migration is social in nature, in that it is carried out by households, lineages, communities, and other groups that provide the infrastructure for decision making, organization, defense, and reestablishment of community. Migrants do not form undifferentiated demic masses, as is posited in early models from Europe (Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1979, 1984). The term "migration" should thus not evoke visions of faceless hordes but population movements structured around existing social groups following culturally relevant procedures for mobilization and incorporation. As Bernardini (2005, 15) has nicely phrased it, the older models were designed to describe the movement of people, not a people.

Second, migration is not the cyclical or habitual human mobility found in the commute from home to farm, mercantile activity, or urban circulation (see in particular Arnauld et al. 2019; Isayev 2017; Van Dommelen 2014). Migration is associated with a permanent realignment of prior social arrangements as people move into a new social context (Cabana and Clark 2011a, 5; Nelson et al. 2014). Baker and Tsuda (2015) give particular attention to this theme of disruption for both the migrants and the receiving population. Migration thus brings together only those forms of human movement that lead to a fundamental re-orientation of habitus and not simply a temporary setting aside, as when we go on vacation and must acclimate to a new schedule and activity space. Thus, the complete process incorporates the withdrawal of people from one physical and social setting (already the focus of notable research, e.g., Cameron and Tomka

1996; Darras 2003), their physical movement across the landscape (rarely captured archaeologically), and their accommodation to the new setting, in which they may or may not be able to rebuild prior social relationships. The need for and memory of former institutions and practices will vary and will be reassembled in different ways at the destination. Exact replication is unlikely. Even in cases where migrants return to their place of origin, their experiences prevent them from simply resuming their prior way of life, underlining that migration is not reversible (Gmelch 1980). These points are critical for many of our contributing disciplines because much of the material evidence cited for migration is part of the processes of incorporation after migrants have arrived at their destination, not the migration itself.

One characteristic feature that has not received sufficient attention from archaeologists is that migration is not an independent process; it is always embedded in similarly disruptive social activities (Castles 2010). The archaeological search for a single material signature for “migration” makes us the last discipline to see migration as an isolated social act (Smith and King 2012). When we treat migration as a discrete process, we fail to engage with a substantial literature that situates migration as either the cause or the effect of social, economic, and political changes (Brettell and Hollifield 2008). Only when we appreciate the contextual variability in migration will we be able to discern the relevant datasets for a particular case. The analytical complexity required for studies of prehistoric migration thus transcends any one discipline and favors maintaining the links between anthropology’s four fields (see Beekman and Christensen 2003; Cabana and Clark 2011b; and Baker and Tsuda 2015 for similar sentiments).

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Migration has reemerged as a topic of theoretical importance after decades of neglect by archaeologists, stemming at least partly from the discipline’s failure to decipher direct material correlates. At the birth of the field of anthropology in the nineteenth century, cultural anthropology, linguistics, biological anthropology, and archaeology were largely in agreement that a high degree of correspondence existed between ethnicity, language, biology, and material culture (see Terrell 2001 for critiques of this perspective). This assumption remained the touchstone for the later culture-historical program of plotting the presence and movement of ethnic groups using the archaeological record (e.g., Childe 1925, 1926, 1928, 1929; Kossinna 1896, 1909, 1912, 1936). Both empirical failures and the ease with which such

simplistic interpretations could be manipulated for political ends (Adams et al. 1978; Arnold 1990) undermined migration as a topic of study.

Nonetheless, many researchers have continued to identify ethnolinguistic groups based on material culture, even when migration per se went undiscussed. Ethnic identity has commonly been invoked in southeastern Mesoamerica, where archaeological remains have a long history of being identified as “Maya” or “non-Maya” (e.g., Thompson 1941; Tozzer 1957). In northern Mesoamerica, scholars have proposed the presence of Nahuatl speakers at Teotihuacan through evidence for religious beliefs found among Uto-Aztecan speakers of Mesoamerica and the Southwest (Hays-Gilpin and Hill 1999, 2008). Others have identified Otomí as an ethnolinguistic group at Xaltocan by their use of distinctive labrets (Brumfiel 1994). In each case, scholars attributed specific beliefs or practices to a corresponding cultural or linguistic group, largely following what Barth (1969) called a primordialist perspective. Apart from the difficulty of isolating characteristics truly limited to a single target group, one must take into account the historically situated nature of such traits. When did the practice originate? How normative was its use? Many scholars acknowledge these tensions but continue to pursue this perspective.

With the coming of more consciously theory-driven approaches, migration was often rejected as a legitimate subject for research (Adams et al. 1978). As discussed elsewhere (Cabana 2011), the processual school in archaeology considered migrations to be too historically situated and unique to draw useful inferences about systemic social processes. Theory dictated that systemic behavior and stable adaptations were the proper focus of research and because of their historical contingency and disruptive elements, migrations could not contribute to our understanding of these research topics. While adhering to a processual perspective, Anthony (1990, 1997, 2010) countered that known historical migrations followed recognizable patterns and processes that could be analyzed through archaeological proxies. Leap-frogging, in which migrant groups bypass others to form a string of related communities, was one such pattern. Chain migration, in which migrants tend to move to locales where fellow migrants have already established themselves, was another. This nascent network perspective was more true to the migration process than the often-aquatic metaphors such as streams, flows, or waves that some scholars still use.

Related research into the spread of Indo-European languages led to the development of the Farming Language Dispersal Hypothesis (Ammerman and Cavalli-Sforza 1984; Bellwood 2004; Renfrew 1987), which associates

the biological success of early farming populations with the spread of their associated language and material culture. Its proponents argued that a more optimal farming adaptation facilitated the outcompetition and replacement of forager populations and their languages and customs. However empirically complicated that model has turned out to be (Renfrew and Bellwood 2002), it provided theoretical justification for processualists to return to migration. Many arguments for the replacement of Neanderthals in Europe by *Homo sapiens* out of Africa are anchored in similar assumptions, although this is rarely discussed as a case of migration (but see Hublin 2017). More effective cultural or biological adaptations (including the capacity for language) have been put forward to explain the ultimate success of our African ancestors following their migration, and these assumptions have influenced the assignment of material culture to Neanderthal or *sapiens* (Hublin 2017; Riel-Salvatore 2009).

Studies of migration have moved beyond strict scenarios of environmental adaptation and evolutionary competition. Scholars of modern and historical migrations have had little difficulty finding political and economic reasons for them and prehistorians have begun to address those pertinent to the ancient world. Some have proposed the existence of climate or political refugees (Beekman 2015, 2019) or have drawn attention to migration as a response to changing labor markets (Blanton et al. 1996). Others have demonstrated that slavery or taking captives in warfare can introduce people of different backgrounds and social practices to close contact with others (Cameron 2011, 2013; Gelb 1973; Ibarra Rojas 2012). Factionalism has been a particularly durable explanation for the departure and resettlement of social groups. This theory focuses on how political disagreements have triggered the departure of one faction across a spectrum of communities, from hunter-gatherer camps to dynastic kingdoms (Houston 1993; Kirch 1984; Lee 1968; Stone 2005). Symbolic perspectives have focused less on the causes of migration and more on how migrants inhabit their new home by equating landscape features with those from their former territory (Escamilla and Fowler 2013; López Austin 2015, positions 2817–2840).

Followers of various schools of thought have addressed migration by highlighting the complex relationship between identity and material culture, particularly at the destination (Berdan et al. 2008; Faust 2006; Fennell 2007; Hornborg and Hill 2012; Stone 2003, 2015). Scholars have aggressively pursued this line of research in the American Southwest, where migrations recounted in oral history have been effectively incorporated into theoretical models of human movement (Bernardini 2005; Cameron 1995; Clark

2001; Cordell 1995; Duff 2002; Glowacki 2015; Kohler et al. 2010; Lyons 2003; Nelson 1999; Nelson and Strawhacker 2011; Neuzil 2008; Ortman 2012; Snead et al. 2009; Stone 2015; Wilshusen et al. 2012). Much of this literature refers back to the archaeological concept of style, in the senses of both active discursive style and practical and unconscious style. Those who pursue the first-order goal of identifying migrants have tended toward the latter, as unconscious behaviors are less likely to be altered through contact and are more indicative of a particular community of practice (cf. Burmeister 2000), such as dietary preferences, clay recipes for pottery, and the organization of domestic space. The culture-historical assumption that artifacts reflect group membership has thus been usefully reframed and nuanced as nondiscursive practice (see also Frankel 2000; Jones 1997).

While archaeologists who follow the nondiscursive approach have made notable progress in determining that a migration did indeed take place, the focus on discourse is more directed toward second-order goals such as reconstructing the social relationships between migrants and natives at the point of destination. The latter approach draws on the well-known communicative aspects of style and the factors that encourage the expression or suppression of group identity, especially when contrasted with unconscious style (Burmeister 2000; Stone 2003). Decoration on pottery (and elsewhere) is framed as a form of discourse, the conscious communication by individuals of particular claims and perspectives. Much like writing or art, external aspects of material culture could be made to selectively communicate information. This approach clearly harks back to Barth's (1969) situationalist approach, in which the expression of group membership can be avoided or accentuated depending on context. Barth tended to reduce ethnic identity to a convenient mask that people donned when they chose to in interactions with other individuals. Stone (2003, 2015; Stone and Lipe 2011) has instead concentrated her analyses on the specific structural contexts that may push individuals to signal or suppress their identity. This approach thus does not reduce expressive culture to mere propaganda or subterfuge (e.g., Marcus 1992) and it does not so much contradict reality as selectively present it based on the context. This perspective relies the least on specific characteristics of identity to label a particular group as one or another. Instead, the intent is to identify the circumstances in which people choose to "stand out or blend in" (Stone and Lipe 2011) in relation to their neighbors, not the traits themselves.

More specifically Marxist variations on this perspective focus on ethnic identity as largely imposed from above and less of an individual choice.