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## Introduction

### Identities, Experience, and Change in Early Mexican Villages

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The topic of identity, or better yet *identities*, is not new in anthropology. The formation of identities, which are probably best thought of as nested, situational, historically contextual, and performed, has historically been a central theme uniting the social sciences (Appiah 2005; Butler 1990; Conklin and Morgan 1996; Durkheim 1915; Fortes 1987; Harrison-Buck 2012; Weber 1930). Archaeologists have treated identity and lived or embodied experience in various ways, depending on the dominant theoretical trends of the day. At its extremes, this spectrum of approaches has created mutually incompatible perspectives. The processualist archaeology of the 1960s and 1970s tended to hold such ephemera at arm's length as dangerous forays into "paleo-psychology" (Binford 1965:204). Postprocessualist thought emerging in the 1980s and 1990s has considered identity and situated realities from the perspectives of gender studies (Blomster, this volume; Brumfiel 2006; Conkey 2001; Conkey and Gero 1997; Hutson 2002; Joyce 2000; McCafferty and McCafferty 1994; Nelson 1997), children and age in the archaeological record (Baxter 2008; Joyce 2000:35–37; Kamp 2001; Lopiparo 2006), and agency and biographies of material objects (Brzezinski et al. 2017; Hodder 2012; Joyce 2012; Mills and Ferguson 2008; Olsen 2010; Viveiros de Castro 2004; Zedeño 2008, 2009). There is a case to be made that archaeology is uniquely suited to this task, as its temporal depth promotes insights into the longitudinal aspects of identity development. This chronological depth, along with a focus on materiality and the senses in different temporal and cultural contexts, gives archaeology a unique perspective among social science approaches. And while archaeologists may have only sporadic opportunities to explore how identity and personhood were experienced by individuals in the past, the scalar nature of our studies is well positioned to

examine them at the community level (see Harrison-Buck 2012; Holdaway and Wandsnider 2008; Joyce 2004a).

Our goal in this book is to bring together an international group of scholars exploring the development of social identity in a broad selection of Formative period (2000 BCE–250 CE) Mexican communities. While the contributors do not always share interpretations, we do share some common themes and interests, including interregional relationships, shifting identities, lived experiences, and the exchange and movement of ideas from the Early Formative period (2000–1000 BCE) to the transition to the Classic period (250–900 CE). Despite a growing corpus of research, sociocultural developments during more than 2,000 years of the Formative period remain controversial topics in American archaeology, as do their implications for later Mesoamerican history. While these are topics that have certainly been considered by others, especially from the standpoint of economic and ecological perspectives, we feel that less has been said about the shifting nature of experiences and identities during this critical period of social change.

## Mesoamerican Identities

Mesoamerica in the Formative period is a research topic ripe for investigating the interplay of changing identities, interaction, and lived experience as well as the relationships of these to broader socioeconomic changes. While scholars have discussed the archaeology of ethnicity broadly (Jones 1997) and regionally specific Mesoamerican identities, particularly of later periods (Berdan 2008; Berdan et al. 2008; King 2020; Rincón Mautner 2015; Stark and Chance 2008), far fewer have attempted to do so for the Formative period (but see Arnold 1995; Lowe and Pye 2007). Scholars have long described Mesoamerica as a land characterized by several ancient linguistic and cultural traditions. Outside the Maya region, two of the largest of these language families are Mixe-Zoquean (note that Beekman [this volume] prefers the spelling Mije-Sokean) to the southeast and Otomanguean to the west and north (Clark 1991; Hopkins 1984; Lowe 1977; Winter and Sánchez Santiago 2014). At times, one or the other of these has been proposed as an “original” source of Mesoamerican culture. The Soconusco region of Pacific coastal Chiapas and Guatemala, with its early ranked societies and communal labor projects, has been termed a “core area” for the development of Mesoamerican culture by 1650 cal BCE (Clark 1991:22; see also Blake and Clark 1999; Hill and Clark 2001; Love 2007). Ceramics appeared there in the Barra phase by roughly 1900 cal BCE. These “embarrassingly well decorated” (Lesure and Wake 2011:85) vessels are among Mesoamerica’s earliest pottery (Clark and Blake 1994; Lowe 1975). The ancient

peoples of Soconusco, referred to by some researchers as the “Mokaya,” were likely Mixe-Zoquean speakers who interacted with their Gulf Coast neighbors across the relatively flat topography of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Clark 1991:13). Linguistic reconstructions suggest that the Gulf Coast Olmecs, probably the best-known civilization of the Early and Middle Formative periods, were also Mixe-Zoquean speakers (Campbell and Kaufman 1976). Compellingly, the Otomanguan and Mixe-Zoquean areas appear to correspond with two great archaeological traditions of the Early Formative period, sometimes termed Red-on-Buff and Locona, in reference to their differing ceramic styles (Clark 1991; Winter 1992:27–28; Winter and Sánchez Santiago 2014).

The transitional phase from the semisedentary hunting and gathering of the Archaic period (8000–2000 BCE) to the increasingly agrarian lifestyles of the Early and Middle Formative was marked by a patchwork-style shift to permanent farming communities using ceramic technologies for cooking, storage, serving of comestible goods and display at public gatherings, and production of iconographic artifacts and musical instruments (Clark et al. 2007; Lesure and Wake 2011; Lohse 2010; Rosenswig 2015; Zizumbo-Villarreal et al. 2012). Different areas of Mesoamerica also saw the first glimmers of social complexity shortly after the beginning of the Formative period, including the Soconusco region and, subsequently, the Olmec heartland of the Gulf Coast (Arnold III 2000; Killion 2013; Lesure and Blake 2002; Love 2002; Rosenswig 2011). The nature of Mesoamerican social complexity is itself a matter of discussion, with many scholars emphasizing the establishment of diverse forms of hierarchical inequality (Blanton et al. 1996; Clark 2007; Fargher et al. 2010; Feinman and Carballo 2018; Flannery and Marcus 2012; Kowalewski 1990; Redmond and Spencer 2006; Sanders and Nichols 1988; Sanders and Webster 1978; Spencer and Redmond 2004; Sugiyama 2005), while others have begun to explore the nature of complex heterarchical distinctions or otherwise critique the traditional model of the nuclear state (Arnold 1996; Crumley 1995, 2004, 2015; Hepp 2022a; Joyce and Barber 2015; Kurnick and Baron 2016; Pauketat and Emerson 2007; Smith 2003). Ideological developments in the Formative period included strengthening panregional religious traditions stemming from deeply shared cosmologies of the Archaic period or even earlier (Blomster 2002; Coe 1989; Estrada-Belli 2006; Flannery and Marcus 2000; Lesure 2004; Masson 2001; Sellen 2002, 2011; Taube 1995, 1996, 2000). All these changes accompanied major shifts in subsistence economies as long-used domesticates became increasingly important in Mesoamerican diets (Arnold III 2009; Blake et al. 1992; McClung de Tapia et al. 2019; VanDerwarker 2006; VanDerwarker and Kruger 2012; Voorhies and Kennett 2011). A central organizing theme of this volume, which is related to the origins of social complexity, is the degree to

which interaction and movement among the various regions of Mesoamerica helped to form the social networks and identities that appear to have blossomed during the Formative period (Blomster 2004; Englehardt and Carrasco 2019; Freidel 1979; Joyce 1993; Lesure 2004; Pool et al. 2010; Zeitlin 1982, 1994).

By the latter part of the Early Formative period (ca. 1400–1000 BCE), numerous communities, including those on the Gulf Coast, in highland Oaxaca, and in Central Mexico, were developing larger and more regionally influential settlements. The Olmec site of San Lorenzo rose to become one of the first large, permanent settlements in North America (Cheetham 2010; Coe and Diehl 1980; Hirth et al. 2013; Pool 2007; Symonds et al. 2002). Despite evidence for language divergence among groups settled in increasingly permanent locales (Bartolomé and Barabas 1996:28–29; Campbell 2013; Hopkins 1984), material sourcing and iconographic evidence suggest that interaction during the Formative period was crucial to cultural developments (Blomster and Glascock 2010; Clark and Lee 2007; Ebert et al. 2014; Hepp 2019a; Hirth et al. 2013; Joyce 2004b; Lesure 2004; Stark and Ossa 2010). The Formative period also saw an increasing degree of standardization in evidence for cosmology. The iconography of rain deities, for instance, became important in many different regions (Covarrubias 1957; Estrada-Belli 2006; Flannery and Marcus 1976; Sellen 2002, 2011; Taube 1995, 2000). Extensive evidence from places such as Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico indicates the exchange of goods and ideas between communities in different regions. Exchange partnerships, augmented by increasing linguistic diversification among sedentary groups and the growing demand for imported materials symbolizing status (including those of “Olmec style”), were reflected in the changing identities and community dynamics of the era (Blomster 2002; Blomster et al. 2005; Diehl and Coe 1996; Flannery and Marcus 2000; Grove 1989; Killion and Urcid 2001; Pool 2007; Taube 2000; see the chapters by Santasilia and Bernard et al., this volume).

Understanding the Formative period not only is critical for Mesoamerican culture history but also informs basic global anthropological questions, including the emergence of sedentism, agriculture, and complex polities (Banning 1998; Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989; Binford 1968; Boyd 2006; Clark 1991; Flannery 1976; Flannery and Marcus 2012; Nelson 1995; Pauketat and Emerson 2007; Pearson 2006; Sanders and Webster 1978; Savard 2018). The Mesoamerican Formative period is frequently approached from the perspective of economic and agrarian developments (Drennan 1983; Flannery 1973; MacNeish 1992; Sanders 1968), and identity and experience are often overlooked. The common justification has been that nonliterate societies left little record of how they saw themselves and their place in the world. One of our central goals in this volume, therefore, is to challenge this assumption by closely examining

the material record's many potential lines of evidence for Formative period Mesoamerican identities. Ceramic vessels and figurines, styles of dress, traditions of ritual practice, cuisine, linguistics, and the adoption of interregional iconographic styles all offer potential insights. In fact, ancient Mexicans left behind an extensive record of material evidence of their identities, including concepts of their place in the cosmos.

## Contributions to This Volume

The contributing authors take new and sometimes contrasting approaches to the Formative period by exploring the roles of interaction and identity in Mesoamerican social development. Map 1.1 depicts Mesoamerica with the key regions and sites discussed in this collection. Table 1.1 provides the approximate dates of major periods in pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican history. Individual authors have been encouraged to deviate from these if necessary, as no one chronology fits all regional contexts. Some authors base their chronologies on uncalibrated radiocarbon dates, while others use calibrated dates. Dates are not calibrated unless specified.

The chapters in this collection are roughly chronological and approximately geographical in their order, beginning with the Early Formative period. These first settled communities of Mesoamerica experienced shifts toward more formalized social inequalities than had existed during the preceding Archaic period. Some recent evidence for this transition comes from research in highland and coastal Oaxaca. The Mixteca Alta site of Etlatongo and its neighbors are notable examples of a shift to a more established village life. The village itself contains one of Mesoamerica's earliest identified formal ballcourts (Blomster, this volume; see also Blomster and Salazar Chávez 2020). Etlatongo is also notable for its interactions with the Gulf Coast Olmecs (Blomster 2002). In his contribution to this volume, Blomster offers a unique attempt to explore the transient and effervescent nature of identity through the analogy of a well-known pop star of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. We think you will agree that this treatment is a radically original take on these scholarly discussions.

Research on Oaxaca's Pacific coast since the mid-1980s has explored the development of complex polities and ecological relationships dating from the Early Formative through late Postclassic occupations of the lower Río Verde valley (for example, Joyce 2010). The site of La Consentida in this region has yielded radiocarbon dates associated with some of Mesoamerica's earliest pottery and mounded earthen architecture (Hepp 2019b). Food-processing artifacts, microbotanical traces, and stable isotopes in human remains demonstrate