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SPECIAL SECTION: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ANCIENT MESOAMERICAN ECONOMIES

INTRODUCTION

The economies of ancient Mesoamerica consisted of well-constructed, deep, structural patterns featuring many intricate rhythms, variations, and often unexpected elements, all of which make them worthy of attentive study. This issue's Special Section offers a series of papers reporting on innovative, new research on ancient Mesoamerican economies ranging in time from the Olmecs and the Classic Mayas to the Aztecs, and across space from the Gulf Coast and Maya lowlands to central highland Mexico. The authors approach the material on site- and context-specific levels which allows them to perceive a high degree of variability or standardization.

In the first paper, **Chloé Andrieu**, **Edna Rodas**, and **Luis Luin** present a new analysis of a large jade preform production area at Cancuen, Guatemala, a Late Classic Maya site located in the border region between the Maya highlands and the lowlands. The theoretical direction of this paper contributes to a better understanding of the production and exchange of prestige goods, or socially valorized objects. The paper focuses on gradations of value of jade objects and the corresponding variety of contexts of production and exchange. A somewhat unexpected conclusion, supported by the authors' careful analysis, is that quality and color of the raw material corresponded to different production processes, values, and distribution within the site of Cancuen.

Erick T. Rochette, in the following paper, challenges assumptions about wealth goods production among the Classic Maya. Based on data from the middle Motagua Valley and elsewhere in Mesoamerica, Rochette suggests that households at all levels of the local social hierarchy were involved in the production of jade beads and preformed blanks intended for final-stage production elsewhere. This possibility contradicts previous models of wealth goods production which have tended to regard such production as an elite-dominated activity. The Motagua evidence suggests the need to evaluate models of wealth goods production with regard to specific temporal and spatial contexts.

In the third paper, **Arthur A. Demarest**, **Chloé Andrieu**, **Paola Torres**, **Mélanie Forné**, **Tomás Barrientos**, and **Marc Wolf** discuss Cancuen's role as a port city and provide new evidence from Cancuen related to economy, exchange, and power. Their evidence suggests that, in addition to long-distance exchange in exotics such as jade and pyrite, Cancuen also was involved in large-scale obsidian transport and production, and in the probable exchange of other piedmont commodities such as cacao, cotton, salt, achiote, and vanilla. Architectural, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence and an administrative/ritual palace all indicate growing roles for nobles in these economic activities. Nobles appear to have taken a direct mercantile role and many aspects of the *multepal* system of power, characteristic of later Postclassic period societies, were already in place at Cancuen by the late eighth century. They conclude that the failure of Cancuen's early transition to a Terminal Classic political economy may be related to its dependence on highland resources and overextended trade networks.

In the succeeding paper, **Thelma Sierra**, **Andrea Cucina**, **T. Douglas Price**, **James H. Burton**, and **Vera Tiesler Blos** offer their archaeological, bioarchaeological, and chemical study of coastal production, exchange, lifestyle, and population mobility from the coastal enclave port of Xcambo, Yucatan, Mexico. Their different data sets document changes in Xcambo's exchange routes and connections during its 500-year history, echoed by increasingly diverse cultural connections and increasing geographic mobility of Xcambo's merchants. These new data confirm the known pattern of gradually intensifying, although still relatively independent, trade dynamics along the Maya coast in the centuries leading up to the so-called "Classic Maya collapse" and the rise of a new merchant league controlled by Chichen Itza. This new order led to the rapid end of Xcambo shortly after A.D. 700.

Diane Z. Chase and **Arlen F. Chase** follow in the next paper with their view of ancient Maya markets and the economic integration of Caracol, Belize. They note that because Maya art and hieroglyphic texts do not contain substantial information on ancient economic systems, some archaeologists have tended to deemphasize the impact of ancient economies in their reconstructions of the Classic period Maya civilization. The Chases' research at Caracol, however, has recovered evidence of the road systems, marketplaces, and production areas that served as the backbone of the site's economic infrastructure. They argue for the existence of an economy based on surplus household production with distribution in elite-administered markets.

Ronald L. Bishop changes the pace somewhat in the following paper with a very insightful and personal view of instrumental approaches to understanding Mesoamerican economy based on more than 40 years of experience in this very specialized field of research. He points out that increased emphasis is being placed on localized aspects of the economy, as seen in studies of craft production, exchange, and consumption, with decreased attention to long-distance trade and exchange as a focus of regional investigation. Bishop attributes this trend to several factors, especially the political context of scientific activity, the scarcity of appropriate analytical facilities, and heightened awareness of the interpretive complexity.

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The next paper by **Christopher A. Pool**, **Charles L. F. Knight**, and **Michael D. Glascock** examines Formative obsidian procurement at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico, and implications for Olmec and Epi-Olmec political economy. They report the results of chemical sourcing of obsidian artifacts from Tres Zapotes using X-ray fluorescence analysis of samples drawn from secure archaeological proveniences assigned to Early, Middle, Late Formative, and Protoclassic periods. Consequently, they are able to characterize changes in the relative importance of different obsidian sources in the political economy of Tres Zapotes across the critical transition from Olmec to Epi-Olmec society with greater confidence than has been possible for the Gulf lowlands until now.

Finally, **Adrián Velázquez Castro** and **Emiliano Ricardo Melgar Tísoc** offer their outstanding analysis of Tenochca (Mexica Aztec) palace production of shell and lapidary objects recovered from the offerings of the Tenochtitlan sacred precinct. They show convincingly that these objects are local products and not foreign artifacts obtained from tribute or exchange. Their formal characteristics allow their identification not only as an important group of artifacts from central Mexico, but as exclusive to Tenochtitlan and even to the Templo Mayor, considering that identical elements have not been found in other groups or in the buildings near Tenochtitlan's *Huey Teocalli*. The authors propose the existence of a technological style characteristic of Tenochtitlan. The high degree of standardization observed in the morphology and technology of these objects and their restricted distribution suggest that the manufacturing took place in a dependent context, probably even in the Mexica ruler's palace.

We are confident that these papers, with their common denominator of site-specific analyses and careful attention to small-scale context are reliable indicators of current trends in the contemporary study of ancient Mesoamerican economies and that they presage more such detailed studies in the near future.

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