

***Interregional Interaction in Ancient Mesoamerica.* Edited by Joshua D. Englehardt and Michael D. Carrasco. Louisville (CO): University Press of Colorado, 2019.**

Richard E. BLANTON

Profesor emérito, Purdue University, Estados Unidos
blantonr@purdue.edu

This is a timely volume that addresses a topic that historically has been central to Mesoamerican research and still poses key research questions. The volume's chapters are a useful reminder that traditional approaches to interregional interaction, couched primarily in terms of diffusion (the movement of cultural traits from group to group) and ethnic group invasion (for example the supposed "Mixtec" invasion of Postclassic Oaxaca [Flannery and Marcus 1983, 277–79]), are largely lacking in terms of explanatory effectiveness. Recently, interregional action research has been enriched by methods and theory suited to the study of migration, interaction spheres, prestige goods systems, and world systems (as the chapter by Gary Feinman nicely describes).

As an experienced practitioner, I appreciated the way many of this book's chapters helped me stay current on the topic of Mesoamerican interregional interaction. Guy David Hepp, for example, reminds readers that, already in the Early Formative, Mesoamerica showed a tendency toward somewhat distinct localized interaction traditions at the same time that there were networks that transcended that scale. The coastal Oaxaca site he describes, La Consentida, provides evidence of participation in multiple long-distance networks, yet is most closely connected to the Red-on-Buff ceramic horizon similar to Oaxaca's Tierras Largas phase. Unfortunately, we still know little about the purposes of this early long-distance interaction or its institutional contexts. In their chapter on script development, Joshua Englehardt and Michael Carrasco detail how, as early as the late Early Formative through the Middle Formative and later, forms of symbolic communication "were transferred from one system to another" (p. 86). For example, the knotted headdress was originally part of the Olmec system but became part of the symbolic repertoire of Oaxaca in the Late Formative.



Speech scrolls and linear-columnar organization became widely shared—suggesting that the architects of Mesoamerican writing, and their sponsors, were cosmopolitans who had an interest in inter-cultural communication. In the same vein, Kerry M. Hull's chapter, a study of the Maya Ch'olan languages and their changes over 2 000 years, demonstrates how Maya hieroglyphic writing included loan words, mostly from Mije-Sokean (the presumed language of the Olmecs) but also Nahua (or Nawa, as the author spells it).

D. Bryan Schaeffer's chapter brings readers up to date on the nature of Teotihuacan/Maya interactions, from the fourth through sixth centuries CE, as seen through the lens of tripod vessels, a Teotihuacan style that was adopted in the Maya area where it became a major ceramic form, albeit with local modifications. The chapter by Jesper Nielsen, Elizabeth Jiménez García, and Iván Rivera also addresses Teotihuacan influence, in this case in Guerrero. They found that carved stone stelae, in Teotihuacan style, were the predominant form of iconographic communication. Some monuments might have included named individuals (p. 186), a subject matter found in this Teotihuacan periphery that was not allowed at Teotihuacan itself. Philip J. Arnold III and Lourdes Budar inform readers of recent research clarifying the nature of southern Veracruz-Coastal Maya interaction.

José Luis Punzo Díaz's chapter is a comprehensive review of the Chalchihuites culture of the Classic and Postclassic periods. This chapter points to a tendency found also in other chapters to ignore recent thinking about interregional interaction, for example, when he concludes that, since prestige goods there signaled the power of local governing elites, world-systems theory must not have any local applicability. I find this conclusion surprising in light of anthropological thinking about world-systems theory (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 1984). Niklas Schulze and Blanca E. Maldonado's chapter views Postclassic metal objects as having served primarily as symbol-laden prestige goods that allow leaders and religious specialists "to connect the community and its people with the supernatural energies of the universe" (p. 325). This in spite of the fact that, as they themselves mention (p. 321–26), metal tools have been found in ordinary household contexts and copper ingots served as a form of commodity money. Both of these chapters highlight how symbol-laden and exotic goods, signifying cosmic and worldly power, strongly shaped ancient Mesoamerica (e.g., Schulze and Maldonado, p. 325). This elitist way of thinking contains a grain of truth but ignores the reality that, especially during the Postclassic,

commoners had greater access to “bulk luxury goods” (Blanton, Fargher, and Heredia Espinoza 2005; Kepecs 2003, 130), a category that included exotic and valuable goods, but that had little to do with the foundations of leadership or the actions of religious specialists. An approach that prioritizes connections between an elite and the valuable and exotic also fails to acknowledge the minimalist material aesthetics embraced during the Classic period at Monte Albán and Teotihuacan, in which there was a lesser role for high-valuable exotic goods in political process and religion.

The introductory chapter by Joshua D. Englehardt and Michael D. Carrasco pushes the study of interregional interaction toward the elitist perspective I just described, and in so doing does not serve the book well as an introduction to the state of the art in Mesoamerican interregional interaction. That problem is confounded by the fact that the chapter is terminologically confusing, for example, their claim that “shared...material culture...” is “both cause and effect of higher-order dynamics” (p. 10) (whatever that is). I was also confused when the authors refer to the importance of identifying “historical processes” and “cultural processes” at the same time they espouse a particularistic approach that prioritizes the “emic” that would place emphasis on the study of local and culturally particularistic symbolic meaning. Yet, processes are understood as phenomena that recur across time and space and that are discovered through comparative research; as applied to symbolism and meaning, comparison has had a powerful influence on our discipline (e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1963; Turner 1969). As Gary Feinman points out in his chapter, to press an emic approach too far is methodologically complicated and will not “free our investigations from the morass of unverifiable, subjective interpretations” (p. 40).

I also disagree when Englehardt’s and Carrasco’s claim that emic inquiry is preferred because it is a more “anthropological” way of thinking and doing (p. 13), seeming to imply that those of us who have addressed social and cultural processes are not really part of the community of anthropological scholars. Why should Mesoamerican researchers hew closely to an “emic” and more “anthropological” approach? Englehardt and Carrasco propose that in the study of interregional interaction we should avoid “market models” that render the researcher “susceptible to embracing a formalist view of economics” (p. 13). In their view, art history and linguistic models, in particular, provide a path to research superior to market models because they consider “shared styles and/or symbolic content” (p. 16). Consequently, they argue, an anthropological approach to interregional

interaction should focus attention on prestige goods because the study of such goods demands attention to “symbolic exchange” and “ritual exchange” (p. 13) (again, explanation of their terminology would be helpful). Of course, prestige goods figured importantly in some aspects of interregional interaction, and many of the book’s authors cite the excellent volume by Mary Helms (1988), and her more recent works, to elucidate their role in building and sustaining the power of a political elite in some cases. However, it is not clear to me how such strategic actions can be understood only in terms of “symbolic exchange,” or “ritual exchange,” given that the Mesoamerican governing elite sometimes purchased prestige goods from merchants (e.g., from the Pochteca of the Basin of Mexico [Smith 2003, 112]). Even in the Classic period Maya kingdoms, where merchants were evidently not highly regarded (McAnany 2013, 235), rulers sometimes acquired prestige goods from them. And, as I mentioned, any approach to prestige goods needs to accommodate bulk luxuries, costly and exotic goods that are available for purchase in the marketplaces and that constituted one element of the consumer choices of commoner households.

Decades ago, economic anthropologists struggled with how formalist economic ideas and methods might be fitted into the unique requirements of anthropological research. Since then, generations of researchers, faced with well-documented economic behavior in diverse cultural settings and time periods, including marketplaces, set about developing new concepts and methods suited to our discipline (e.g., Kowalewski 2012). This significant body of theory and method is not mentioned in the introductory chapter, thus failing to acknowledge fruitful new avenues of inquiry that are neither entirely emic nor entirely formalist, instead drawing selectively on both perspectives to discover rich and productive new research directions. Fortunately, the book’s other authors do not always follow the editors’ line of reasoning very closely. Hall, for example, alludes to Ch’olan terms related to trade and to the possibility that some loan words from proto-Mije-Sokean possibly related to trade (p. 137-38), and the reader who is interested in a more up-to-date view of new research directions can refer to Feinman’s chapter.

I did notice one possible expression of anti-market mentality in the book. This is the lack of attention paid to one of the key aspects of Mesoamerican interregional interaction, especially during the Postclassic. I refer to the various paragovernmental traders’ coalitions such as the Pochteca (which is alluded to in one chapter described below) and the Putún Maya

traders who brought a syncretic Maya/Mexican culture into the Maya area from the Gulf Coast lowlands. Postclassic centers that functioned primarily as trade entrepot, such as Tlatelolco, Tochtepec, Tututepec, Cozumel, Naco, and many others, are also barely mentioned in the book, even though they were important channels through which interregional interaction took place and represent a considerable enhancement of Postclassic institutional capacity for the same. And entrepot may have an earlier history during the Classic Period, for example at Cantona (as described in Charles L. F. Knight's chapter in this volume) and Maya Chunchucmil (Hutson, ed. 2017). Trade entrepot deserve research attention also because they represent an alternate pathway to Mesoamerican social complexity in which the fiscal economy of polity-building was based on commerce rather than on the more typical agrarian base, and because they don't always illustrate rule by kings. Cholula should perhaps be added to the list of entrepot, based on the chapter by Timothy J. Knab and John M. D. Pohl in which they analyze the contemporary city's elaborate cargo system that, they suggest, may have a pre-Hispanic precedent. The cargo system provides for a form of governance in which successful merchants who fund the city's elaborate round of religious festivals gain the social capital needed to rotate in and out of positions of civic authority (albeit for short periods), at the same time the cargo system provides a social safety net for the poor. I agree with David Freidel who, in his concluding chapter, sees their model as having "significant potential for elucidating the interface of social institutions and regional exchange interaction deeper in time" (p. 375).

By arguing that "competitive interaction at the local level can be more transformative than peaceful long-distance interaction" (p. 341), Joyce Marcus seems to undercut many of the book's other authors whose goal is to understand the role of interregional interaction in social and cultural change. Specifically, she argues, early state-building in Mesoamerica can be understood solely as a consequence of localized conflicts, a claim that, in my opinion, reaches too far given that we still have much to learn about this subject matter. For example, to support the argument for the Valley of Oaxaca, Marcus refers to supposed warfare between early Monte Albán and Tilcajete, a scenario that is not widely accepted by other researchers, at the same time it fails to acknowledge the abundance of new information about surrounding regions (e.g., Kowalewski et al. 2009) that will help researchers understand the valley's and Monte Albán's roles in interregional interaction during that crucial period of social and cultural change. Marcus's

Maya example is prefaced by the claim that Teotihuacan had little impact on polity-building in the Maya area, contradicting the argument of Nielsen et al. in their chapter (p. 179), but this issue is far from being fully understood. Rather than external influence, competitive interaction in Mirador area between the large Preclassic sites of Nakbe, Dzibanche, El Mirador, and Calakmul, is seen as “the engine driving the creation of the first Maya state” (p. 357). David Freidel, however, in his concluding chapter, makes an argument similar to mine regarding Oaxaca when he argues that Marcus’s argument is premature because “more and more large Preclassic sites are being discovered every year... [even outside the Mirador area]...This landscape...will have to be much better understood archaeologically before we can address the kinds of interactions that its inhabitants undertook that moved them in the direction of increased scalar complexity” (p. 376).

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