

*The Archaeology of Political Organization: Urbanism in Classic Period Veracruz, Mexico.* Barbara L. Stark. 2022. Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, Los Angeles. xxiii + 384 pp. 246 figures and 19 tables. \$89.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781950446148. \$72.00 (ebook), ISBN 9781950446193.

Reviewed by Rex Koontz, University of Houston

Barbara L. Stark's book is a data-rich synthesis of more than 40 years of her settlement survey work in the Western Lower Papaloapan basin (WLPB) of south-central Veracruz, Mexico. Guiding the interpretation of the voluminous data is the question of how urbanism developed in that part of the Gulf Coast Lowlands during the Classic period (around AD 300–900). The study of earlier Olmec developments immediately to the south of this region has often overshadowed analysis of thriving Classic period cultures in the WLPB and nearby, an oversight that Stark addresses in this book.

Previously the WLPB was known chiefly for Classic period carved monuments from Cerro de las Mesas, including stelae with hieroglyphic writing. Although this monograph does not discuss these monuments at any length, it provides by far the most important archaeological data to date for understanding the social political context from which these monuments (and related art and architecture) emerged.

The book's 13 chapters may be divided into three major groups: (1) those that present general settlement data and methods (Chapters 1–4); (2) those that focus more on monumental complexes and their role in regional studies of urbanism (Chapters 5–11), and (3) synthetic chapters (Chapter 12 and especially Chapter 13).

The initial data-rich chapters firmly establish the parameters of low-density urbanism operative throughout the Classic period: dispersed settlements blanketed the region punctuated by monumental complexes that defined political centers. The evidence for the earlier Late Preclassic period suggests a smaller population, with the only real concentration of people

being around what would become central Cerro de las Mesas.

The chapters on monumental complexes describe the region's centers and the remarkably consistent architectural plan—the Standard Plan Plaza Group (SPPG)—that structured the Classic period centers. The SPPG consisted of a plaza defined on one side by a conical mound and on another by a ballcourt. Elongated mounds defined one and sometimes both remaining plaza sides. Similar consistent plaza organization may be found in many examples in the Cotaxtla/Jamapa drainage, to the north and west of the WLPB, as shown by Annick Daneels. Although elements of the SPPG may be found earlier in Late Preclassic Tres Zapotes to the south, the plan as a whole was a new formulation at the beginning of the Classic period in the WLPB and was to remain fundamental there for the rest of the first millennium AD.

Cerro de las Mesas and Azuzules, both in the fertile Blanco River delta region of the WLPB, were the largest Classic period monumental centers. Stark suggests that these two centers were connected to form a regional capital zone throughout much of the Classic period. Cerro de las Mesas came to prominence first, in the Late Preclassic, but was eclipsed by Azuzules by the Late Classic period. A host of secondary sites sprang up in the region in the interim. The packing of secondary centers in the delta region is particularly notable.

Stark's survey data show that the WLPB cultural tradition collapsed and the major centers abandoned sometime between AD 800 and 1000. This was also around the time of the disappearance of major elements of Classic elite culture throughout the Gulf Coast, such as the making and carving of fine stone yokes. The Postclassic period is not the focus of this book but is treated in some detail to better define the end of the Classic period tradition.

Low-density urbanism forms a key frame for the book's analyses throughout, especially in the synthetic chapters. Unlike in the Classic period in the altiplano, the WLPB did not boast large, nucleated cities; instead, households were spread across the landscape,

punctuated by a few primary centers with monumental architectural complexes.

In a synthetic statement on political organization (Chapter 13), Stark pursues a more general outline of governance, focusing on detecting strategies for achieving and maintaining power, rather than speculating on the specifics of political organization. Stark reads the repetition of SPPG in monumental complexes large and small across the WLPB as indicating mainly segmentary governance principles that privileged collective action and corporate principles over autocratic ones. Segmentary here refers to the tendency to replicate political functions at every level of organization. Stark is quick to point out that there is a continuum between corporate and autocratic principles that is continually being negotiated. In general, however, low-density urbanism with segmentary governance is here juxtaposed with the centralized authority of the “big states” of Classic Highland Mesoamerica, especially Teotihuacan and Monte Albán.

For Stark, this highland/lowland division may be seen across considerable parts of Mesoamerica. The large number of relatively independent polities across tropical lowland Mesoamerica, which here includes both the Classic Gulf Coast and the Classic Maya Lowlands, is seen to privilege segmentary governance

principles. However, Stark also argues that the Classic Maya and south-central Veracruz lowland regions differed: south-central Veracruz was less interested in the centrality of dynastic rule (a hallmark of the Maya but also seen in the stelae of Early Classic Cerro de las Mesas) than in following a template for the design of all centers (the SPPG). Here it may have been helpful to differentiate more energetically between patterns seen in the Classic Maya Lowlands and those seen in the study area while accounting for recent hypotheses on fluctuating Classic Maya superstates and their relation to the highland capitals.

The book presents a moderately skeptical critique of settlement survey results in Mesoamerica generally. Stark is especially wary of polity boundary definitions that are too quickly accepted as definitive. She also takes aim at an earlier hypothesis driving a number of Gulf settlement analyses: that redundant subsistence production made political centralization unlikely. To counter this traditional narrative for the WLPB, Stark highlights the evidence for varied ecological areas, more economic differentiation, and larger capitals in the region than has previously been recognized. All future studies of the Mexican Gulf Coast will greatly benefit from Stark’s careful rethinking of Classic period settlement in the WLPB region.