1 Ways of Understanding Southeast Mesoamerica

Southeast Mesoamerica, a subarea of Mesoamerica comprising contiguous portions of El Salvador, western and central Honduras, and east-central Guatemala, is an environmentally and culturally heterogeneous zone. Its great diversity on both counts has led some to question whether it is a distinct unit of study (Sheets, Hoopes, Melson, et al. 1991). We consider how it has come to be characterized as such later in the chapter. For the moment, we want to stress that pre-Hispanic Southeast Mesoamerica's cultural variety offers multiple paths for investigating its rich past. One is the traditional route, often glossed as culture history. That account, like the culture histories of other world areas, charts local political, demographic, social, and cultural shifts and relates them based on the movement of people, distinctive goods, artifact styles, and production techniques among different areas (see Curet and Oliver 2021 for issues that need to be considered in pursuing this approach). McEwan and Hoopes' edited volume on Central America, the Caribbean, and northwest South America (2021) exemplifies this approach.

Our objective is to describe the political histories of Southeast Mesoamerican societies and to see them as occurring within a matrix of interpersonal interactions operating through social networks that range from those encompassing households to others that transcended the subarea. This study builds on extant culture histories by considering how people of different ranks in sundry places variably cooperated in acquiring, and contesting for control of, resources needed to centralize power, create hierarchies, and challenge both processes. It is a narrative about agency and the power to turn human potential into actions with demonstrable, if often unintended, consequences. This, to us, is a profoundly human story that never conforms to a master narrative but constitutes salient motifs in many people's histories. We outline how and why we pursue this goal in Chapter 2.

Acknowledging the diversity of Southeastern societies also highlights what they have to teach us about being human. For one thing, the varied ways in which prehistoric Southeast Mesoamerican populations made

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their livings and constructed their worlds using diverse things are remarkable for such a relatively small area (ca. 55,000 km^2). As Gover and Diaz put it, "we can see that the peoples of pre-Hispanic Central America developed uniquely local identities and cultural traditions while also engaging in vital exchanges of ideas, goods, and technologies with their neighbors in all directions" (2013: 7). Difference emerged in the context of frequent intersocietal interactions. Such diversity speaks to the ingenuity that all people employ in creating the stories that become our histories. It also issues a challenge to understanding how such diversity coexisted with, and was promoted by, these sustained contacts. We take up that question throughout the volume.

Southeastern groups also demonstrate different ways of challenging the creation of stark inequalities. They are similar in this to their counterparts throughout Central America who also resisted the siren call of hierarchy (Parker, Boswell, and Knabb 2022; Sheets, Hoopes, Melson, et al. 1991; see McEwan and Hoopes 2021). What sets Southeastern societies apart from those located further to the east and south within the isthmus is that the former were in close contact throughout much of their histories with centralized, hierarchically structured political formations, especially the realms that flourished in the Maya lowlands during the fifth through tenth centuries (Joyce 2013: 15). Such proximity, and the interactions facilitated by it, posed challenges to the autonomy of, and opportunities for innovation within, Southeastern societies that are not as marked as those seen elsewhere in Central America. Research in the Southeast, therefore, provides an excellent opportunity to understand how people living on the margins of powerful domains dealt with, and influenced, agents of those imposing political formations (Parker, Boswell, and Knabb 2022). The capacity of many Southeastern societies to resist cooption within larger, more complexly structured realms highlights the different forms resistance to state control can take and questions the inevitability of imperial expansion and its equation with "progress" (Joyce 2013: 15).

In sum, most Southeast Mesoamericans never built a temple to rival those of their lowland Maya neighbors, nor did they leave behind elaborately carved monuments bearing witness to the accomplishments of past rulers. What they have to say to us is less about ostentatious shows of power than about how those of different ranks living in varied locales made their diverse histories in cooperation and competition with agents living in polities of differing scales and levels of complexity.

We begin the story with a brief overview of Southeast Mesoamerican environments and the area's linguistic and cultural diversity. Next, we consider how understandings of Southeast Mesoamerica's pre-Hispanic past were shaped by approaches to research that dominated archaeology

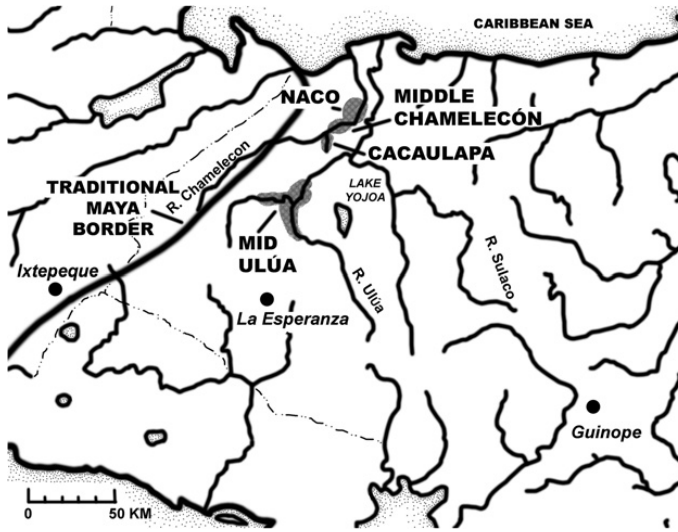

Figure 1.1 Map of Southeast Mesoamerica

in the United States during the early and middle twentieth century. The legacies of those perspectives continue to exercise considerable influence over how archaeological investigations in Southeast Mesoamerica are pursued and the area's remains interpreted.

In these and subsequent sections, we foreground our research within northwest Honduras' Naco, Middle Chamelecón, Lower Cacaulapa, and Middle Ulúa valleys (Figure 1.1). We do this, in part, because the work is familiar to us. Its results also exemplify many of the general processes that occurred throughout Southeast Mesoamerica. No area completely typifies the region's prehistory. The variety of sociopolitical formations that arose throughout the subarea, and the processes by which they developed, defy easy categorization or inclusion in simplified storylines. Nonetheless, these four neighboring basins highlight that diversity in conjunction with events occurring in other parts of Southeast Mesoamerica.

There are two other reasons for dealing in some detail with our work in northwest Honduras. First, the data on which the interpretations are based can be found online at the Four Valleys of Honduras Project Archive (https://digital.kenyon.edu/honduras/). Having these field records available enables your exploration of topics raised in the text in more detail than is possible within these chapters. Second, accessing the records gives you the chance to challenge our views and carry the analyses

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further than we did. Archaeological research in the Southeast and elsewhere is an open-ended project. Each investigator contributes to the collective effort of understanding the past, a project they will never see completed. This book might be a chance for you to evaluate what that ongoing project looks like so far, and to identify where there are major gaps in our knowledge. By making the records of our research available, we hope that you might be tempted to add to this unfolding investigation.

Southeast Mesoamerica's Physical Environments

General Overview

Southeast Mesoamerica encompasses a diverse array of environments stretching from the Caribbean coasts of Honduras and Guatemala south across mountainous terrain to Honduras' and El Salvador's Pacific littoral (Vargas 1997; West and Augelli 1976). There are many ways to describe the region's diverse physical settings. Given the importance of agriculture to Southeast Mesoamerica's populations throughout much of their histories, we highlight those aspects of soils, temperatures, slope angles, altitudes, and rainfall that directly impinge on cultivation practices.

The relatively narrow Caribbean coast is generally hot year-round and subject to considerable precipitation that originally sustained dense rainforests with mangrove swamps along the shore. High temperatures in this zone range from 25 to 35°C, with the hottest months falling from April to August. Precipitation is concentrated during June to December, with 140–160 mm of rain falling each month. In some years, inundations of over 400 mm in a single month occur, especially in Guatemala's Lower Motagua valley. That basin, along with Honduras' Lower Ulúa (also called the Sula Plain) and Lower Aguan valleys, are major southward extensions of the coastal zone. These areas of relatively flat terrain project as much as 120 km southward into the mountainous interior. The Motagua, Chamelecón, Ulúa, and Aguan rivers are the primary watercourses that drain the northern plain. Rising in the mountains to the south, they periodically enrich with alluvium the generally flat coastal soils, especially in the aforementioned valleys. These factors taken together make the north coast a productive area for Indigenous agriculture. It is no surprise that the Motagua, Sula, and Aguan valleys have been centers of commercial farming in recent times, especially the large-scale cultivation of bananas.

The aforementioned rivers and their tributaries cut deep, generally narrow valleys within the southern mountains that provide their

headwaters. These steep escarpments, which encompass about 80 percent of Southeast Mesoamerica, rise as much as 2,850 m above sea level. The highest elevations support limited areas of cloud forests, as is the case on the north edge of the Naco valley. The higher altitudes also contribute to a moderating of annual temperatures and some lessening of rainfall. The result is a clearer distinction here between wet and dry seasons than is the case on the north coast. The wet season generally starts in May and runs through December, the dry season taking up the remaining months. It is a rare year when no rain falls in any month, and periodic dry spells can occur during the rainy season. Nonetheless, the pattern of alternating wet and dry periods was fairly predictable until recent years, when global climate change began contributing to greater unpredictability in rainfall. Upland vegetation until the past century seems to have consisted primarily of mixed deciduous and pine forests, pines generally being found at higher elevations. Clearing of slopes, partly for farming, has stripped out most of the deciduous trees and led to their replacement by pines at ever-lower altitudes. The latter seem to be better adapted than are their deciduous counterparts to the thin and relatively poor soils that result from the erosion that follows such clearings.

Soils in the interior of Southeast Mesoamerica are generally thinner and poorer in nutrients than are those on the north and south coasts. They are formed on parent materials that tend to be old metamorphic rocks, parts of ancient landforms that have been heavily eroded for eons. The relatively steep slopes that border valleys are also subject to high levels of erosion once stripped of their natural vegetation, thereby reducing the years during which they can be successfully cultivated without significant modifications, such as fertilizers or terracing. These generalizations mask a complex environmental mosaic. Timing and amounts of precipitation can vary significantly across short distances, as high mountains shield areas on their lee sides from rain that falls in greater quantities on their opposite flanks. The sizes of upland basins also differ considerably. For example, the Comayagua valley in west-central Honduras encompasses 550 km^2 of flat to rolling productive farmland. In contrast, in many other areas arable terrain is scattered over river terraces and small upland pockets that can be as small as several hundred square meters. Further diverging from this pattern is the Lake Yojoa basin in west-central Honduras. Encompassing about 308 km^2, this lacustrine environment is rich in agricultural and aquatic resources. Lakes were also formed within volcanic calderas in the El Salvadoran highlands at the south edge of the mountainous interior.

In general, larger interior valleys tend to be found on the fault lines along which the Motagua, Chamelecón, and Humuya rivers run from

south to north. The last is a major affluent of the Ulúa river. More restricted river terraces characterize the Middle drainages of the Ulúa and perennial tributaries of the Chamelecón and Humuya rivers.

Variations in the extent of arable tracts and ease of travel across mountain passes presented opportunities and challenges to the area's populations. Broad open basins might attract larger numbers of people than could be sustained on more restricted river terraces. Similarly, efforts to centralize power by nascent elites could have been facilitated by the concentration of potential clients within physically circumscribed valleys but was frustrated by environments that favored their dispersal across mountainous terrain. Part of what makes Southeast Mesoamerica's prehistory so intriguing is the frequency with which those expectations are not met. Aspects of ancient physical environments were certainly crucial in conditioning the sociopolitical formations and cultural patterns that emerged in this part of the world. How such variables were understood and deployed by those who fashioned local culture histories was, however, not determined by the natures of those environments.

The interior uplands give way on the south to the volcanic ranges of El Salvador and then to the Pacific coastal plain that stretches from western El Salvador to southern Honduras, where that nation borders the Gulf of Fonseca. This area of flat land is one to thirty-two kilometers wide. High temperatures along the littoral vary between 28 and 32°C, while rainfall is mostly concentrated between May and October, when precipitation per month varies between 150 and 358 mm. On the eastern edge of this zone, in southern Honduras, high temperatures commonly reach 37°C.

Soils on the Pacific coastal plain, and in the uplands lying immediately to the north, formed on recent volcanic deposits and are generally rich. Their porosity promotes cultivation even on fairly steep slopes without significant erosion. Apart from the Rio Lempa, the rivers flowing south from those mountains and across El Salvador are short. Consequently, the volume of water they carry is prone to dramatic fluctuations depending on how much rain falls in their northern headwaters. Temperature, rainfall, and soil regimes combine to make much of El Salvador's upland and coastal soils some of the most agriculturally productive in Central America. Such bounty attracted early settlement and sustained agricultural activities, sometimes at very large scales, through to the modern era. The source of that fertility could also be destructive of human lives and livelihoods. Volcanic eruptions caused environmental damage and loss of life throughout El Salvador's past and continue to menace its present.

Southeast Mesoamerica is variably rich in mineral resources that were used by Indigenous populations. Volcanic rocks, including andesite and vesicular basalt, are found throughout the area. The former was used to

manufacture chipped stone tools, while the latter was often employed in making ground stone implements, especially the manos and metates used to process corn and other materials. Additional raw materials found here that were used to make stone tools include chert and obsidian. The former is occasionally associated with limestone deposits, while the sizable La Esperanza obsidian flows are situated within the steeply sloping terrain that comprises the Ulúa river's headwaters. The La Guinope obsidian source, in turn, is in the mountains southeast of Honduras' capital, Tegucigalpa, near the Nicaraguan border. The La Union and Source Y obsidian flows along the Chamelecón river in northwest Honduras yield relatively small nodules of this material, which were used primarily in the manufacture of sharp flakes employed in domestic tasks. By far the most heavily exploited obsidian source in Southeast Mesoamerica is the extensive Ixtepeque flows. This series of deposits covers around 30 km^2 and is located in the mountains of southeastern Guatemala just west of the country's border with Honduras and El Salvador. Marine shell, including conch and *Spondylus* used for ornaments and in rituals, is available from the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.

The Middle Chamelecón, Lower Cacaulapa, Naco, and Middle Ulúa Valleys

The Naco valley is an interior basin that covers 96 km^2 of flat-to-rolling terrain and is one of the larger expanses of flat land within the Chamelecón drainage. It is essentially a bowl surrounded by steep mountains, with the Chamelecón river coursing southwest to northeast through the valley following a geological fault. This watercourse divides the basin into two parts of unequal size; the larger west segment encompasses around 77 km^2, while the remainder of the valley lies east of the river. The Middle Chamelecón basin covers approximately 70 km^2 and begins where the Chamelecón river enters the Naco valley in the south. This stretch of the Chamelecón river extends for 9 km to the west, where it is joined by the Rio Cacaulapa, a perennial tributary of the Chamelecón. Thirty percent of the Middle Chamelecón is flat to gently rolling terrain dispersed across terraces bordering both banks of the eponymous river. These and the upland valleys within the basin's otherwise-steep escarpments do not measure more than 2 km^2 each.

The Cacaulapa river extends for 17 km south of the Chamelecón, its headwaters lying 2.5 km north of the Middle Ulúa drainage. The lower stretch of the Cacaulapa valley where our research focused encompasses around 30 km^2, of which roughly 7 km^2 consists of relatively level, arable terrain. As with the Middle Chamelecón, these areas of productive soils

are dispersed across terraces and highland valleys that encompass 1.5 km^2 or less. The Middle Ulúa basin covers 135 km^2 and is comprised of rugged terrain in which river terraces and upland valleys are separated by steep slopes. The largest segment of flat land here measures 8.5 km^2, though most such areas cover 1 km^2 or less. The same topography, therefore, characterizes the Middle Ulúa, Lower Cacaulapa, and Middle Chamelecón valleys, whereas the Naco valley stands out for its comparatively broad expanse of continuous, open terrain. Rainfall averages about 40 mm per month in these valleys at the peak of the dry season, with approximately 240 mm per month falling during the rainy season (May through November). The Naco and Lower Cacaulapa valleys are about 10 km apart; the Middle Ulúa basin is roughly 35 km south of the Naco valley.

Current Conditions

A great many archaeological sites have been destroyed throughout Southeast Mesoamerica over the past half-century. While looting is certainly a problem in some cases, economic development in the forms of large-scale commercial agriculture and the building of houses and factories has taken its toll. What can be known about Southeast Mesoamerica's prehistory is rapidly disappearing, despite the best efforts of the national institutions whose agents oversee their countries' prehistoric and early historic remains.

The Naco valley is an example of the pace and extent of these losses. Today, the west side of the basin is heavily occupied. As factories of various sorts expanded along the highway, so too did patches of housing for those working in these facilities or providing services to their employees. A few of the settlements are planned, with paved streets, electricity, and at least communal water taps. The bulk of the housing, however, is more ad hoc and found in settlements that are roughly divided by unpaved tracks, two small vehicles-wide, with house lots lining the rustic roads. Here residences range from those made with concrete blocks, to adobe, *bajareque* (wattle and daub), and stick or cane walls; any wall style can be covered with tin roofs or palm-leaf thatch. There may be a few power lines, but not all of these more informal housing areas are electrified. There are often no municipal water supplies, and many streams no longer run year-round or carry potable water when they do.

Away from the highway on both sides of the Chamelecón river, various forms of industrial agriculture are practiced. There are still some small landholdings, and residents of the town of Naco till their *encomienda* (communal) lands by hand using such tools as dibble sticks for planting.

Commercial agriculture has, however, largely usurped the most fertile tracts. These agricultural enterprises center on cattle raising and the cultivation of sugarcane, fodder grass, and *plátanos* (cooking bananas). The growing of ornamental plants for export continues after more than four decades. Similar activities are found along the Chamelecón immediately northeast of the valley, with the addition of orange groves.

Development has destroyed or heavily damaged more than 80 percent of the sites recorded during a 100 percent survey of the valley conducted from 1975–9 and 1988–96. Even the largest ancient settlements, whose dense concentrations of stone platforms provide the most stubborn obstacles to their destruction, have been severely disrupted. Sites have been plowed, flattened by bulldozers, and robbed of stone for house construction. Looking over the valley while doing research there in 2022, we were impressed by how little we would know of the basin's prehistory if we were beginning our studies there today. Archaeologists always work with those materials that have survived long enough for us to find and study. Certainly, when we initiated research in the Naco valley, some ancient settlements were already lost. What has been breathtaking, however, is the accelerating rate of site destruction over the past fifty years. Similar processes occurring at comparable scales and paces have been recorded in the Lower Cacaulapa, Middle Ulúa, and Middle Chamelecón valleys.

Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

The dissected, rugged terrain that characterizes most of Southeast Mesoamerica may have contributed to its linguistic diversity. Communication across the region was channeled along, but not restricted to, certain corridors such as those defined by river valleys. Linguistic patterning might have followed these routes, creating a lattice-like arrangement of languages that was not arranged within distinct territorial blocks. Reconstructing that variation depends on the vague accounts provided by Spanish *conquistadores* during the sixteenth century. Language groups that were extant within Southeast Mesoamerica during the early 1500s include speakers of Chort'i (Maya) in far-western Honduras; Tolupan (Jicaque) in the lower Ulúa and Chamelecón drainages; Pech (Paya) along the Lower Aguan river near the coast; and Lenca in central and southern Honduras, possibly extending into eastern El Salvador (Lara Pinto and Hasemann 1995). Groups in western and central El Salvador that are generally glossed as "Pipils" spoke Nahua, a language of Central Mexico. The latter were relatively recent arrivals in the area, having begun their migration southward in the eighth century (Fowler 1989; see Chapter 8). Nahua was also spoken by at least

segments of populations living in other parts of Southeast Mesoamerica. It may be that this language, or a version of it, facilitated trade and communication among culturally and linguistically diverse societies throughout the region. In that case, Nahua's distribution possibly relates to population movements and to the importance of long-distance exchanges that depended on an ability to communicate with people of different backgrounds (Fowler 1989).

As difficult as it is to describe linguistic patterns in Southeast Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century, it is even more challenging to extrapolate back from the little we know of this diversity into the region's deep past without surviving examples of Indigenous texts. We know that Nahua speakers were late arrivals to Southeast Mesoamerica. What of those who spoke other languages, such as Lenca? The Naco, Middle Chamelecón, Lower Cacaulapa, and Middle Ulúa valleys fall within what is usually seen as the home of Lenca speakers. We, however, have no direct evidence to support such a claim, except perhaps for the sixteenth century when the Spanish made their few initial observations on these areas and their inhabitants.

It is important to bear in mind that the histories of the Southeast's Indigenous populations did not end with the Spanish Conquest. Massive population losses, slaving expeditions, and other social disruptions certainly followed from that disastrous encounter (Chamberlain 1966; Sherman 1978). Nonetheless, Native groups creatively navigated the colonial systems in which they were obliged to function (Black 1995; Gomez 2021; Lara Pinto 2021; Mihok and Wells 2014; Sheptak 2021; Weeks, Black, and Speaker 1987; see articles in Thomas 1991), surviving attempts by Spanish and successor national governments to suppress and eliminate them (e.g., Tilley 2005). Ethnographic accounts of these populations are spotty. The most detailed descriptions of Southeastern Native cultures are available for Chort'i Maya speakers living on the Honduran/Guatemala border near the lowland Maya center of Copán (Metz, McNeil, and Hull 2009; Wisdom 1940). Reports on other Native groups include those on the Tolupan (Chapman 1985, 1992; Conzemius 1923; Davidson 1985), the Mayangna (Conzemius 1932), and the Lenca (Chapman 1985; Lara Pinto 1991b; Stone 1948; Tucker 2010), all from Honduras, and the Pipils of El Salvador (Campbell 1985; Chapman 1960; Fowler 1985, 1989).

Through much of the twentieth century, many of the Southeast's inhabitants were reluctant to acknowledge any connections to antecedent peoples, a legacy of discrimination and oppression (Tilley 2005). More recently, resurgent Native identities have become the bases for political movements seeking social justice including, but not limited to, protection

of the environment and rights to land (e.g., Valenzuela Perez 2020). The assassination of the Lenca human-rights activist Berta Caceres in 2016 highlights the great risks Indigenous people take in pursuing social and environmental justice in Honduras and the Southeast, and the violence that still stalks them (www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/case-history-berta-c%C3%A1ceres).

What is clear is that Southeast Mesoamerica today and throughout its past was and is culturally and linguistically rich. That diversity has not always been appreciated or, if recognized, was not thought to be significant in understanding the Southeast's long history. We turn now to a brief consideration of the intellectual structures that framed archaeological research in the Southeast and what the implications of those viewpoints are for the current state of investigations in the area.

Research History

The history of research in Southeast Mesoamerica has been powerfully shaped by several key concepts: "culture," "culture area," "boundary," "periphery," and "core." These notions exercise their influence as parts of theoretical structures that have been used to describe and interpret Southeast Mesoamerican prehistory (Joyce 2021). Such frameworks and their associated vocabularies allowed researchers to pursue focused investigations and compare their findings. The danger arises when words are not understood in relation to the theories whose basic assumptions and premises they express. No longer aware of their roots in specific conceptual formulations, terms can appear as unquestioned, universally applicable behavioral givens. Vocabularies then become intellectual straitjackets (Wolf 1982: 3). It is only through historical analyses that these connections can be rediscovered and the power of words revealed.

We start, therefore, with a brief review of how the terms commonly used to structure Southeast Mesoamerican archaeological research came into being (for a detailed review of the history of archaeological research in Central America see Hoopes and Salgado Gonzales 2021). We argue that "culture," "culture area," "core," "periphery," and "boundary" were intended to convey relatively static, classificatory, and hierarchical visions of prehistory. Such viewpoints make sense for certain purposes but do not capture the fluidity and dynamism of interpersonal interactions at any scale. New terms, expressing novel theoretical positions, are essential to conveying the nature of these contacts and to capturing the cultural, social, political, and economic variety that characterizes the subarea. Some suggestions concerning how the latter objective might be realized are offered in Chapter 2. In the interim, research in the Naco, Lower

Cacaulapa, Middle Chamelecón, and Middle Ulúa valleys is used as an extended example of points made in this section. In considering these specific cases, we can speak directly to the seductive power of words on researchers in general, and on ourselves in particular.

Drawing Boundaries

The initial goal of archaeologists working in Mesoamerica, as it was throughout the world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was to organize the growing body of data that was coming to light. In the United States, where archaeology was incorporated within anthropology, modes of organizing finds had to speak to questions of past cultures. Cultures, in turn, were treated as spatially bounded groups of people who were thought to share similar assumptions about the world and how to live within it. These were the essential units by which human behavioral and material variation were to be understood. Just as describing modern cultures was central to the project of ethnography, so defining and outlining the histories of past cultures was the focus of archaeologists (Trigger 2006; Willey and Sabloff 1995).

There was, of course, the problem of how to go about the latter task. The solution was found in the idea of the trait. Early cultural anthropologists in the United States used traits to describe the lifeways of those they studied. Traits, seen as distinct elements of behavior, could be as small as the way in which a stone tool was chipped to as complex as the conduct of a communal ritual. The important point was that cultures were described, and distinguished, by the unique mix of traits of which they were thought to be composed. Cultural boundaries were drawn by tracing the distribution of these behavioral and material features across the landscape. Cultures that occupied contiguous territories and that shared some of their traits comprised a culture area (Dixon 1928; Kroeber 1939; Wissler 1917). Culture areas were, in turn, divided into subareas based on perceived variations in the expressions of otherwise-shared traits. These divisions became the bases for organizing academic specialties, anthropological curricula, and museum displays. The world, as taught and exhibited, was a patchwork of bounded cultural units. The distribution of traits defined those entities.

If archaeologists were to contribute to this project, they would need ways of defining cultures and culture areas that were analogous to those used by ethnographers. The answer was to identify traits in the materials investigators recovered during fieldwork. Forms and styles of pottery, architecture, stone tools, and the like became the essential traits whose appearances were thought to have been shaped by the basic values and

Table 1.1 *Material traits traditionally used to define Classic-period lowland Maya culture*

Architecture:
Cut-block masonry
Plastered floors and architectural surfaces
Stucco and/or painted architectural decorations
Corbel vaults in superstructures and tombs
Sculpted architectural ornaments
Structure Forms and Groupings:
Temples, palaces, acropolises, quadrangles
Ballcourts and associated markers
Public spaces on the north; Elite residential complexes on the south
Monuments:
Carved stelae with hieroglyphic inscriptions
Stelae frequently paired with altars
Artifacts:
Distinctive polychrome ceramics
Ritual Deposits:
Burials and/or caches dedicatory to large-scale constructions

assumptions that distinguished the cultures of those who made and used them. The distribution of traits over space defined the extents of past cultures. Changes in such diagnostic traits through time, as revealed by stratigraphy and seriation, were used to describe the phases by which individual culture histories were written. Such changes were often explained by diffusion, the spread of ideas, and migration (e.g., Lowie 1917). The concept of the trait was, therefore, crucial to the archaeological project of describing ancient cultures indirectly but in ways that conformed with the prevailing anthropological paradigm.

This was the conceptual framework in which archaeological research in Southeast Mesoamerica began in the late nineteenth century and continued into the 1960s. Initial investigations primarily aimed to identify the borders of the lowland Maya culture subarea, a component of the Mesoamerican culture area (Longyear 1947; Lothrop 1939). The territorial extent of lowland Maya culture was recognized by the distribution of its distinctive material traits, especially those dating to the Classic (CE 200–900) period, the culture's supposed demographic, political, and cultural apogee (Table 1.1). Many of these hallmarks were manifestation of elite power and could be identified from surface remains encountered at ancient political capitals. Consequently, the search for boundaries gave rise to extensive, but not systematic, surveys in search of monumental

centers (Lothrop 1925, 1927; Longyear 1947; Strong 1935; Yde 1938). Capitals such as Copán in western Honduras and Quirigua in northeastern Guatemala that had dramatic expressions of lowland Maya traits emerged as early foci of archaeological research in the Southeast (Morley 1913, 1920).

Once the boundary of the lowland Maya subarea, which included Copán and Quirigua, was defined, research beyond that limit waned. The Naco valley was unusual in that the initial work conducted here combined survey with test excavations (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938). The latter were devoted primarily to investigating the ancient town of Naco, a settlement known from early Spanish accounts to have been a major Indigenous center of long-distance trade by the sixteenth century (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938). Nonetheless, research in much of the Southeast, including that of Strong and his colleagues, did not give rise to more intensive studies during the immediately following decades. Even the relatively ambitious Naco investigations were never published in their final form. This pattern of research contrasts markedly with the accelerating pace of archaeological, ethnohistoric, and ethnographic investigations in the adjacent Maya lowlands throughout the early and middle twentieth century (Sharer and Traxler 2006). One reason for this discrepancy, we argue, lies in the power of a name, "boundary." Boundary denotes a fixed limit across which interchanges are restricted, if not precluded (Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; De Atley and Findlow 1984). This is how the term was used to define the southeastern limits of lowland Maya civilization. Having identified the border of lowland Maya culture, everything beyond it was, by definition, marginal.

Even during a period when archaeological assemblages were linked to language and culture groups, no consensus existed on what to call the people who resided beyond the lowland Maya's southeast border (cf. Stone 1940, 1941, 1942). This is partly due to the sparse and confused ethnohistoric accounts available for Southeast Mesoamerica. It is also because these people rarely came up in archaeological discourses. Lying outside the limits of the Maya world, their study irrelevant to reconstructing that world's history, scholars simply did not often refer to Southeast Mesoamerican societies. Lacking names, Southeastern people became the "non-Maya," defined less by who they were than by who they were not.

The definition of lowland Maya studies certainly required some partitioning of the research universe. "Culture," "culture area," "subarea," and "boundary" were fully appropriate within a scheme that stressed cultural classification and the importance of trait diffusion in the histories of territorially circumscribed social units (e.g., Trigger 2006; Willey and

Sabloff 1985). The legacy of this approach for Southeast Mesoamerican research, however, was profound and is starkly highlighted in the *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Wauchope 1964–1976). This definitive review of Mesoamerican studies contains fifteen articles dealing with lowland Maya archaeology and one essay each devoted to El Salvador (Longyear 1966) and Honduras (Glass 1966). The last two papers appeared in the volume on "Frontiers and External Connections," thus further distancing them from the Maya articles that appeared in two volumes on "Southern Mesoamerica."

From Marginal to Peripheral

Intensive excavation programs initiated during the late 1960s by Sharer at Chalchuapa in western El Salvador (Sharer 1978d), and Baudez and Becquelin at Los Naranjos in central Honduras (1973) changed the nature of Southeast Mesoamerican research. Dating of Olmec Gulf Coast centers in the 1950s (Drucker, Heizer, and Squier 1959) suggested the antiquity of complex social formations in Mesoamerica and spurred the search for comparably precocious political capitals throughout that culture area. Los Naranjos and Chalchuapa fell within this early span and so were relevant to the emerging research focus.

There had also been a sea change in archaeological theory by the middle 1960s, which led to a reevaluation of Southeast Mesoamerican archaeology. Growing awareness that developments within specific societies had to consider inputs from outside their borders was initially manifest in trade studies (e.g., Earle and Erickson 1977; Schortman and Kipp 1989; papers in Sabloff and Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975). Sharer's research at Chalchuapa, for example, highlighted the importance for Chalchuapa's prehistory of ties maintained by this center's leaders with Olmec traders during 900–650 BCE (Sharer 1974). Baudez and Becquelin also used Olmec connections to help explain Los Naranjos' early florescence (1973: 417). Though links with the Classic-period lowland Maya were not initially stressed, the groundwork was laid for rethinking relations among the latter and their non-Maya neighbors.

Work at Chalchuapa and Los Naranjos was succeeded by a steady stream of investigations conducted through the 1990s in western and central Honduras outside Copán (e.g., Ashmore, Schortman, Urban, Benyo, and Smith 1987; Dixon, Joesink-Mandeville, Hasebe, et al. 1994; Henderson 1977; Henderson, Sterns-Wallace, Urban, and Wonderley 1979; Hirth, Lara Pinto, and Hasemann 1989; Joyce 1991; Nakamura, Aoyama, and Uratsuji 1991; Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman, Urban, Ashmore, and Benyo 1986; Urban 1986; Wonderley 1981) and

El Salvador (Andrews 1976; Bruhns 1980a, 1980b; Sheets 1992). This research greatly enhanced our understanding of prehistoric Southeast Mesoamerican developments, especially those that occurred during the Classic period when most Southeastern societies experienced significant increases in population and sociopolitical complexity. In the process, some basic conceptions, and the words used to express them, changed.

Attempts to clearly demarcate the lowland Maya culture subarea were replaced by efforts to understand how "influences" from that zone crossed a boundary and affected Southeast Mesoamerican patterns of political, demographic, and economic change, particularly during the Classic interval. The assumption guiding this work was that lowland Maya notables and their agents played active roles in causing observed shifts within Southeast Mesoamerican societies. It was thought that Southeastern leaders, using trade connections and the knowledge gained from them, adopted all aspects of lowland Maya civilization that they could. Such emulation spurred major cultural transformations, encouraging the appearance of hierarchies in polities that previously lacked them. The replication was invariably imagined to have been partial, leaving Southeastern societies as pale reflections of their lowland Maya neighbors. Influence coursed one-way and "downhill," from high to low culture (cf. Dietler 1998).

Southeastern societies, in this scheme, were connected to lowland Maya states. No longer excluded beyond a *boundary*, they existed now in a *periphery*. The latter term captured the sense of a permeable membrane through which ideas and goods could flow *and* reinforced the marginality of Southeastern populations (Urban and Schortman 1986). As these societies had to be peripheral to something, the lowland Maya culture subarea metamorphosed into a *core* composed of numerous, variably independent states, each with its own capital (e.g., Sabloff 1986). Thus was born the Southeast Maya Periphery, appended to a lowland Maya core to which it was linked by a one-way flow of goods and ideas. Not causally engaged with the cultural and political florescence of lowland Maya Classic-period civilization, Southeast Mesoamerica was as marginal to intellectual discourse as it was thought to have been to prehistoric interchanges.

Research in the Naco, Middle Ulúa, Lower Cacaulapa, and Middle Chamelecón Valleys

We avidly subscribed to this view when beginning work in Southeast Mesoamerica. Pat directed our initial research in the Naco valley, first with John Henderson (1975–7) and later on her own (1978–9). These

investigations were shaped by such questions as, "Were the basin's residents Maya?": "If not, how were they related to the lowland Maya?" It was also driven by the assumption that the area's prehistory would closely parallel, on a reduced scale, better-known developments in the Maya lowlands. Pat anticipated, therefore, finding evidence of a diminutive Classic-period domain whose relatively small population was arranged, at most, into two hierarchical levels (Urban 1986; Urban and Schortman 2019). The organization and appearance of monumental edifices would mimic lowland Maya elite forms, most likely those found at nearby Copán or Quirigua. After completing a ground survey of about two-thirds of the basin, reviewing the map of La Sierra, the largest valley center, initiated by John Henderson, as well as the results of test excavations Henderson directed at La Sierra and those directed by Pat at nineteen other sites, Pat saw little reason to question her original assumptions (Urban 1986). If anything, an apparent dearth of foreign goods suggested that the Classic-period Naco valley was surprisingly disconnected from its neighbors, "a very fascinating case of inner marginalism within an already marginal area" (Baudez 1986: 336). We were, therefore, happy to leave after 1979 in search of populations with stronger ties to the lowland Maya. To us, the important questions that might be profitably addressed in Southeast Mesoamerica had to do with the impacts of core states on peripheral developments. If the Naco valley lacked signs of those interactions, it was not of great intellectual interest.

That place to which we relocated, together with our colleague Wendy Ashmore, for four field seasons (1983–6) was the Middle Ulúa drainage about 35 km to the south. Fully 261 sites were recorded here during a survey program that concentrated on examining areas of flat to rolling terrain that attracted early and protracted settlement; 62 of those sites were excavated. The questions animating our investigations centered on how resident elites variably drew on local resources (mostly arable land) and foreign assets (primarily in the form of ideas and symbols derived from Copán) to claim and sustain their power during different periods of the area's deep past (ca. 400 BCE–CE 1532). The importance of relations with lowland Maya potentates loomed large in these formulations (Ashmore 1987; Ashmore, Schortman, Urban, Benyo, and Smith 1987; Benyo and Melchionne 1987; Black 1995, 1997; Schortman and Urban 1987b, 1995; Schortman, Urban, and Ashmore 1984, Schortman, Urban, Ashmore, and Benyo 1986; Urban and Smith 1987; Weeks 1997; Weeks, Black, and Speaker 1987; Weeks and Black 1990).

We returned to the Naco valley in 1988 hoping to spend one more season devoted to finishing work left undone in 1979. That field season, largely spent remapping and excavating at the largest site in the basin, La

Sierra, revealed that our earlier interpretations of the valley's prehistory had been seriously off the mark. We subsequently spent eight more field seasons (1988, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1996, 2018, 2022) trying to figure how and in what ways we had erred. As these investigations proceeded, we found questions of Mayaness and Maya influence receding as we focused increasingly on how local elites secured and defended their claims to preeminence through their control over aspects of craft production during the seventh through tenth centuries (Schortman and Urban 1994, 1996, 2012b; Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001; Urban and Schortman 2004). Investigating relations among processes of production, consumption, exchange, and power spurred excavations throughout the valley as well as in previously unstudied parts of La Sierra. Of the 483 sites recorded in the basin, 77 were excavated, this work revealing a prehistoric occupation spanning at least 1200 BCE–CE 1532.

The significance of our mistakes can be understood in several ways. We suggest that one lesson to be learned from them is the ways in which concepts such as "important" and "interesting" are conditioned by the conceptual frameworks within which we conceive and pursue our investigations (Urban and Schortman 2019). In a world thought to be composed of distinct cultures, the larger and more complexly organized examples shaping the histories of their more diminutive and simpler neighbors, the Naco valley was uninteresting. Seeing the importance of what that basin's prehistoric residents accomplished meant thinking of the world in different categories and talking of them in new terms. Those categories and concepts were provided by developments in archaeological theory that took shape beginning in the late 1970s. We discuss some of these changes in Chapter 2. In applying novel concepts to our research, we learned to appreciate the limits of the frameworks from which they were derived as well as the possibilities they offered to see the ancient world in ways we had not imagined possible in 1979 (the reflexive relation between theory and field research in our investigations is detailed in Urban and Schortman 2019).

Research in the Naco valley led us to pursue work in the neighboring lower Cacaulapa drainage about 10 km to the southwest. The presence here of a sizable monumental center, El Coyote, with 415 structures, was a surprise, given that fertile soils within the basin are widely dispersed across small terrace segments and upland valleys. The area seemed ill equipped to support the large populations that we thought were needed to build and sustain such a capital. Work at El Coyote and in its environs was devoted in large part to comparing the sources of the rulers' prominence with what we could discern of power relations in the Middle Ulúa drainage 30 km to the south and in the Naco valley. Investigations here

spanned 11 field seasons (1999–2018) during which 58 sites were recorded on survey and 12 excavated by us, their occupation encompassing at least 800 BCE–CE 1532 (McFarlane 2005; McFarlane and Schortman 2017; Urban, Schortman, Shugar, and Richardson 2013; Wells 2003).

The Middle Chamelecón valley connects the last two areas and attracted our attention in part because of the presence there of one of the largest sites we encountered during our work in northwest Honduras. Las Canoas, with 133 structures, appeared at first to have been a southwest extension of the Classic-period realm centered on La Sierra, perhaps established as part of an effort to formalize the latter's border with El Coyote's domain. Survey within this drainage during 1991 and 1999–2008 concentrated on recording settlements located on the few areas of flat land found here, although gentle slopes were also examined. Fully 87 sites were described, of which 18 were excavated, prehistoric occupation in the basin beginning by, minimally, 800 BCE and continuing through at least CE 1100. Most of our research centered on Las Canoas where 58 of the surface-visible buildings were exposed. By the end of these studies, it became clear that Las Canoas was home to a politically autonomous community whose members engaged in the large-scale production of ceramic vessels, which were distributed northeast and southwest into the Naco and Lower Cacaulapa valleys during the seventh through tenth centuries (Stockett 2005, 2007, 2010). The power of its rulers may have derived to some extent from their roles in the exchange of these containers, a topic we are continuing to investigate.

In at least one way, the research history outlined here recapitulates general trends in Southeast Mesoamerican studies. What began as an exploration of relations between dominant lowland Maya cores and residents of their peripheries has been transformed into investigations of the relations varied Southeastern people independently forged with diverse groups living in different areas in pursuit of their sundry goals. The study of Southeast Mesoamerica's prehistory is a collective effort in which many have participated and are currently engaged. Archaeologists working in the subarea bring different interests to the task, each exploring complementary aspects of these ancient people's complex lives. We as a group have not lost track of the lowland Maya at Copán, Quirigua, and elsewhere. It is just that these well-known populations have become parts of a larger mosaic of societies, the interactions among their members shaping the prehistories of the region's populations. It is those dealings, pursued over multiple spatial scales, and their varied outcomes that we will consider throughout the volume.

Looking West, North, and South

One legacy of the Southeast's inclusion in Mesoamerica is that investigations here have generally looked west and north, relating events chronicled in the Southeast with those that occurred in the Maya lowlands and other parts of Mesoamerica. The aforementioned temptation to view the Maya lowlands as a core whose leaders exerted outsized influences on their smaller Southeast neighbors reinforces this trend. We as archaeologists are gradually freeing ourselves from these assumptions. Still, most of us who work in the Southeast find it hard to divert our westward and northward gazes.

There are some good reasons for attending to the connections that Southeastern populations initiated and sustained with those living in other parts of Mesoamerica. In particular, relations among Southeastern people and Mesoamerican populations, especially the lowland Maya, have figured significantly in the political processes that are the focus of this study. Nonetheless, looking to the west for inspiration has made us as archaeologists less likely to acknowledge the significance of ties that existed between Southeastern societies and their neighbors to the east and south in Central America and northern South America. Most of that vast area, with the debated exception of Greater Nicoya in western Nicaragua and northwest Costa Rica, was traditionally treated as beyond, and largely irrelevant to the study of, Mesoamerica. These views are changing as scholars come to appreciate the varied forms sociopolitical complexity took throughout Central America and the ways in which exchanges of goods and ideas within and beyond the isthmus spurred developments that had Indigenous roots (Hoopes 2005, 2013, 2017; Joyce 2013, 2021; Sheets, Hoopes, Melson, et al. 1991). Still, the significance of these ties to political contests within the Southeast remains unclear in most instances. As such, we have less to say about the Southeast's relations with Central American peoples than we do with those living in Mesoamerica. Future research along the lines of the studies included in McEwan and Hoopes (2021) will address this deficit.

Methodological Considerations

What can be said about pre-Hispanic developments in Southeast Mesoamerica differs by place and time period. Among the factors contributing to this situation are: varying degrees of preservation and the physical salience of the relevant materials; continuities in material styles that can make distinguishing among remains dating to different time periods difficult; and variable interest on the parts of researchers in

learning about events that happened during specific intervals in particular places. The significance of these variables is not uniformly applicable everywhere across the Southeast. For example, we found it challenging to separate Late Preclassic from Early Classic deposits in the Naco valley because material styles from the former persisted to a considerable degree into the latter. The same periods, however, were clearly marked in the Middle Ulúa drainage. Consequently, our understanding of events that transpired during these centuries is clearer for the latter valley than it is for the former. Appreciating what can be said, and with what confidence those statements can be advanced, about the Southeast's political histories requires considering these biases in the data.

The Early and Middle Preclassic (1200–400 BCE) has attracted the attention of archaeologists since the middle of the twentieth century. This is in large part because it was during these centuries that the first inklings of political centralization and hierarchy appear in the area. A major obstacle to such studies is that settlements dating to the period are difficult to identify from surface remains. Most constructions then were built of perishable materials directly on ground surface, the ancient remains frequently being blanketed by deposits resulting from natural (such as floods) and cultural processes (including later occupations raised atop earlier versions of the sites). As a result, Early and Middle Preclassic materials often appear in the course of excavations conducted in later settlements, their presence prior to digging being hard to predict. Centers boasting large platforms that date to the Early and Middle Preclassic are an exception to the pattern. These constructions were generally resistant to processes of burial and destruction. As a result, what we know about the Southeast during 1200–400 BCE is largely biased toward the behaviors and their associated materials that were involved in raising and using early monumental architecture. How the vast majority of Early and Middle Preclassic populations lived remains poorly known.

Late Preclassic (400 BCE–CE 200) and Postclassic (CE 1000–1550) occupations in most of the Southeast are also difficult to locate for the same reasons as those cited for the Early and Middle Preclassic. Exacerbating the problem for the latter period has been, until recently, a general lack of archaeological interest in developments dating to the last pre-Columbian centuries. Long concerned with what has traditionally been seen in Southeast Mesoamerica as the gradual evolution of sociopolitical complexity that peaks in the Late Classic (CE 600–800), we as a field have tended to ignore what occurred during the centuries following that supposed florescence.

The Early Classic (CE 200–600) sees the gradual shift from the relatively impermanent constructions that characterized most domiciles in

the Preclassic to the erecting of stone-faced platforms atop which the buildings of all social classes were raised. This change makes Early Classic settlements of all sizes easier to recognize on archaeological surveys. We are no longer required to make inferences about past events based largely on what we can learn from sites with sizable platforms. What can pose an obstacle to describing developments during this interval are continuities between Late Preclassic and Early Classic material forms and styles in many areas. Where we cannot distinguish confidently between deposits dating to these spans, we are hampered in understanding what happened during the Early Classic.

Materials dating to the Late Classic are the most consistently sought and studied in Southeast Mesoamerica. Deposits pertaining to this span are often marked by the appearance of new styles in multiple materials, including pottery vessels, ceramic figurines, incense burners, and stamps, along with stone tools. Though not all buildings were now raised atop stone-faced platforms, many were, thus making the recognition of Late Classic sites relatively easy. Finally, as noted, most investigations conducted in Southeast Mesoamerica have been devoted to studying Late Classic developments. This emphasis is partly due to our, as archaeologists, attraction to questions dealing with the appearance and operation of hierarchically structured realms ruled by powerful elites. Since these domains proliferated across the Southeast from CE 600 to 800, Late Classic materials have been perennial sources of interest. The seeming contemporaneity of political apogees during the seventh and eighth centuries in Southeast Mesoamerica and the Maya lowlands has also tended to draw our attention to the Late Classic. This emphasis follows from the well-established tendency in the area to see developments in the Maya zone as somehow spurring changes in the Southeast. Consequently, changes in building materials and artifacts have conspired with archaeological research agendas to render Late Classic occupations particularly visible and relevant to debates within Southern Mesoamerican studies.

Separating Late Classic from Terminal Classic (CE 800–1000) deposits poses problems in some places owing to the significant persistence in material styles across them. This situation is obviated when temporal diagnostics, such as fine-paste ceramics, distinctive polychrome vessels, and imported pottery containers and obsidian, are part of an assemblage. This is especially the case in the Comayagua, lower and middle reaches of the Rio Ulúa, and Copán valleys of Honduras, as well as in many parts of El Salvador. The Naco valley, in contrast, has few such chronological markers; nor do the segments of the Middle Chamelecón and Cacaulapa rivers outside the site of El Coyote where we have worked. Identification of a Terminal Classic phase in those areas depended on

recognizing subtle shifts from the Late to Terminal Classic in the forms, styles, and frequencies of locally made materials, primarily ceramics (Urban and Schortman 2019). That process took several years, thereby slowing our recognition of developments that characterized this interval in the basin.

Interest in all periods of Southeast Mesoamerican prehistory is growing, expanding to include events that occurred during the colonial and later periods (e.g., Sheptak 2021). Nonetheless, finding materials pertaining to many of those epochs is not universally easy, and the vestiges of earlier research emphases continue to draw our attention to some areas and time periods while discouraging work in others. We will see the effects of these limits and potentials in the chapters that follow.

The Book's Organization

The book's overarching goal is to summarize general trends in the political histories of Southeast Mesoamerica's populations. How we will compose that narrative is addressed in Chapter 2. Chapters 3 to 12 review changes in those power relations, proceeding in chronological order from first settlement to the Spanish *entrada* in the early sixteenth century. In each section, we will compare and contrast political trends that are attested throughout the area. General similarities in the historical trajectories of different societies certainly emerge from this study. Just as important are the many ways in which the sequences varied. One of the challenges posed by the study of Southeast Mesoamerican prehistory is developing ways of simultaneously accounting for such convergences and divergences, specifying how interactions among varied agents living in different areas created both outcomes. Chapter 13 summarizes the results of these studies, considering how varied segments of past populations contested for power by drawing on the resources at their disposal.

The interpretations offered here are hypotheses subject to revision as research within and beyond the Southeast continues. Though some inferences may appear without qualifiers, such "strong" claims should not be mistaken for assertions that these interpretations are beyond question. Throughout our careers, we have been repeatedly surprised by how incomplete and partial our knowledge of Southeast Mesoamerica is (Urban and Schortman 2019).

The ancient inhabitants of Southeast Mesoamerica crafted ways of organizing societies that deserve to be remembered if only to remind us of the different ways members of our species have come to be ourselves in distinct settings and time periods. There are other lessons to be learned here as well. Some of these concern the manners in which societies of

different sizes and forms forged their histories in the course of interactions that were not necessarily dominated by the leaders of a few realms. There are no grand regularities in these processes, at least none that are currently obvious. At this point, we simply hope that the comparisons offered here will help pose questions that all of us who work on the margins of large domains might ask, and that they will aid in creating vocabularies by which we can raise those queries and debate the answers in ways that are productive and mutually intelligible.