Richard E. Blanton, Gary M. Feinman, Stephen A. Kowalewski, And Linda M. Nicholas. *Ancient Oaxaca*

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This is a comparatively short book, 132 pages of text, with bibliographical essays (what would usually be called “additional readings”), extensive bibliography, and adequate index. It is clearly intended to used as a textbook, attempting to summarize our current knowledge about the pre-Columbian cultures of the Oaxacan Valley. Like most textbooks written by several authors, the style is excessively dry. I often wonder, when reviewing potential textbooks, why it is that even good writers become boring when the task before them is to educate the young. However, if one can get past the style, there is actually a great deal of useful information available. The theoretical assumptions made, however, cause me some concerns.

The book follows the standard anthropological format, presenting assumptions and showing the larger background area of which Oaxacan culture was a part, in an Introductory chapter. This chapter, along with the last chapter, may well be the most interesting section of the book to members of this association, since the model of society which is being used is that of world-systems. Since world-systems theory, as developed by Wallerstein, was intended to deal with the complexities of our contemporary and global society, some questions have evidently been raised about the appropriateness of applying this model to societies which are not global, as any pre-Columbian society must be by definition.

This difficulty is primarily addressed in this work by attempting to demonstrate that Oaxacan society, at least in its later stages, was a civilization, as that term is understood among anthropologists. It is then argued that the development of such a civilization is best understood as a series of developments of increasing areas of influence. It would seem to me that this argument is somewhat circular, in that the model of interpretation’s validity is being provided by that very model. This sort of circularity is a problem I have with this book throughout.

The second chapter deals with the physical environment of the Oaxacan Valley, thus again conforming to the standard anthropological format. The data are presented clearly with both text and a number of maps and charts. We are also introduced to the first site to rise above the level of village, that of San Jose Mogote. At this site, there are burials that might besuggestive of a hierarchical system but no elite residences.
There is also a single stone-faced terrace with carved decorations and the first hints of writing. Again, I find the arguments against seeing the burials as proof of the development of hierarchy as circular, using the model to prove the model. I am also amazed that no notice was taken of the very remarkable fact that writing preceded even the barest beginnings of civilization. Perhaps the authors did not consider this the proper forum for discussing this most remarkable fact.

The authors also argue that existence of a dual system of symbolism implies the existence of a dual moiety system rather than a chiefdomship. The authors present examples from other areas of the Americas, especially that of the Tewa in the southwest of the United States, but these examples seem superficial to me, and fail to consider or cite major sources on this issue. The authors also fail to consider Chang's suggestion of such a dual system in Shang China, an area obviously well past the pre-chiefdomship level. Thus, demonstrating that the society is divided into two groups hardly seems adequate evidence for asserting that the society can therefore not be a chiefdom. The authors then further assert that the residence pattern does not show a moiety system in later periods, thus making the whole point moot. However, the dual symbol system, as in much of Native American culture, is present throughout the history of the area.

The third chapter is concerned with the development of Monte Alban, the best known and probably central site of Oaxacan civilization. Since Monte Alban could have never been self supporting, as it lacks both a water supply and any large area of fertile ground, when Monte Alban was settled in 500-300 B.C., the Oaxacan Valley must have developed into a society with a core and peripheral areas. It is thus America's first example of an "Urban Revolution." During this early period, the population grew at an estimated 6% per year. Further, this increase was not at the expense of smaller communities in the valley and thus represents an absolute increase for the area.

This early growth would clearly put strains on the ecological and sociological systems and would have lead not only to urbanization, but also to the force necessary to support such urbanization. Remains of art support the existence of this, in its standard Mesoamerican pattern of the sacrifice of war captives. It is further proposed that Monte Alban existed as a "disembedded" capital, that is as a compromise choice between warring factions, rather like the choice of the site of Washington, D. C. The only argument presented for this is one of analogy and none of the examples given is Native American, so I am some-
what underwhelmed by this idea.

Chapter four, entitled "the Great Transformation," deals with the move at Monte Alban to a completely civilized culture characterized by hierarchy in settlement sites and the civic-ceremonial world. The authors propose that a four level hierarchical system existed among the sites in the Oaxacan Valley, using the world-systems model. However, I observe some problems in applying a world-systems model to this area. The habitation sites plotted for this area do not at all exhibit the core-periphery pattern that would be expected. At the very least, it seems that in order to describe what was happening in the Oaxacan Valley some significant modification of world-systems theory is required.

The inability of Monte Alban to feed itself presented agricultural difficulties. The authors propose that this is what led to the development of markets and a corresponding specialization of labor. This is certainly an ingenious solution to the problem of why a society which faced no external ecological threat, such as is assumed to lead to the development of such specialization in other cultures, would have begun to specialize. However, the ecology was not adequate to support this large population, as shown by a marked decrease in population, and so Monte Alban went the way of all civilizations.

The last chapter is entitled "Synthesis and Conclusion." In this chapter, the issue of why, rather than merely how, Oaxacan civilization arose is considered. Five traditional explanations for the development of civilization are given and shown to be inadequate for Oaxaca. The first, diffusion, is simply not the case for Oaxaca. Although I know some members of this society will argue this point, it is the received wisdom in anthropological circles that Oaxaca received no help from the old world and there were, of course, no other new world civilizations yet, since Monte Alban was the first.

The second theory, of which Marx is an example, is that civilization develops in order to control conflict. The authors are willing to grant that conflict reduction might have played some part in the development of civilization at Monte Alban, but they note that the necessary controlling elites are a rather late development.

Third, it has been proposed that civilization develops as an adaptation to aspects of ecology, the need to control or modify threats from the natural world. However, as we saw, no such threats can be shown to have existed at Monte Alban, at least initially.
The fourth theory, termed functionalism, assumes that civilization develops in order to maximize some function of society. The most extreme form of this is the assumption that civilization exists to protect the interests of a despotic elite, a theory proposed by thinkers such as Polanyi. Thus, civilization is a con game in which an elite takes a share off the top of a redistribution system and eventually use force to keep the con going. Unfortunately, there is little evidence for redistribution systems in Mesoamerica.

Alternatively, the function in question can be that of information, and civilization develops, according to this theory, in order to deal with the increasing complexity of society. Since we lack extensive records for Monte Albañ, we really don’t know what the elite did, so it is hard to say whether or not Monte Albañ was an information processing point. I found the failure to consider religious symbolism and parallels to the Mayan elite very strange here.

Thus, according to the authors, while all these theories, except the first, provide some information about why Monte Albañ developed, none can completely explain this first development of civilization in the New World. They therefore propose seeing Monte Albañ in terms of what they call “boundedness,” that is, in terms of the exchange across borders.

Thus, instead of examining a site in isolation and attempting to determine why it developed a civilization, the authors propose that we view Monte Albañ in the context of the increasing population and complexity in the entirety of Mesoamerica. The need to meet this increase, plus the ecology of the Oaxacan valley thus led to a “precocious” development of a core-periphery system based on a need to retain boundaries. As in so much of the theoretical material in this book, I am bothered here by a circularity. The model is used to justify the model.

Although I have made a number of objections to the specifics of using the world-systems models in explaining the development of Monte Albañ, I nevertheless found this a valuable book. If world-systems theory is to be of predictive value, then it must be expanded to deal with cultures other than our contemporary one. Science cannot operate on single examples. The only other examples of cultures to which world-systems theory can be applied are historical (unless there really are Vulcans). Thus, I very much approve the goal of this book, even while objecting to many of the specifics of carrying it out.

—Lee Stauffer