

Part II

Landscape, Monuments, Arts, and Rituals in Bio-Cultural Perspectives in Mesoamerica

Part II Introduction

Mesoamerican Landscape, Monuments, and Rituals in Bio-Cultural Perspectives

Saburo Sugiyama and Claudia García-Des Lauriers

The “Out of Eurasia” program centrally deals with agents who created civilizations, focusing specifically on the relationship between human biology and culture that developed during the last 10,000 years in the New World and islands in the Pacific Ocean. We explore peoples’ unique brain capacities and behavioral dynamics that consequently created stratified complex societies, or “high-cultures” composed of landscape modification strategies, advanced technologies, belief systems, and complicated social structures. These emerged independently from the primary civilizations in Afro-Eurasia (mainly Egypt, Mesopotamia, Indus, and China) from which our current conceptualization of civilization deeply stems. We realized after 1519 there were two more primary cultural units that are also highly developed in the New World; Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations. We here review different kinds of studies of Mesoamerican societies to critically reevaluate explanatory models of evolutionary trajectories proposed mostly on the basis of the Old-World data.

One of the most important characteristics of Mesoamerican complex societies is the symbolic city-scaping and monumental constructions with palaces and plazas, surrounded by other functional facilities. Public activities carried out around them were the cultural focus of ruling groups, specialists, and the general public (See Tsukamoto this volume; Joyce 2004). These zones functioned not just for political/administrative or economic transactions but were pivotal points for the formation of meaning that further structured and were themselves

structured in the minds of agents and through their social behaviors. In this first meeting, we concentrate on monumentality, the metaphor of the “sacred mountain,” and their related ideological issues in Mesoamerica (Broda et al., 2001; Hlúšek, 2020; López Austin, 1997, this volume).

Most contributors to these proceedings discuss distinctive local features and materials related to landscape, monuments, rituals, pilgrimage, human bones, or ancestor worship that are a reflection of human cognition, imagination, memory, collaborative behavior, and/or altruism. We hope this first transdisciplinary gathering in Mexico brings new ideas and data useful in comparative contexts to illuminate human nature or the mechanisms employed by agents who created Mesoamerican civilization. We gathered at Teotihuacan with the aim of exploring the 3,000 year long (1,500 BCE~1,500 CE) evolutionary processes in material culture of distinctive Mesoamerican centers like San Lorenzo, Monte Albán, Teotihuacan, Cholula, some Maya cities, and other related centers, providing examples of advanced human cognition, behavior, or psychology (brain-body-environments interactions) and propose that these can lead to a better understanding of the dynamic interactions between people and nature through time.

The chapters in this section of the proceedings are organized by geography and theme (Figure Part II.1). They cover the local variations of the “sacred mountain” theme at various sites throughout Mesoamerica from the arrival of first people to the continents until the time of conquest (c.

15,000 BCE-1521 CE). Sugiyama's introductory chapter, uses interpretative "niche construction" models (Iriki and Taoka 2012) to understand the social evolutionary processes of hunter-gatherer communities that migrated into the New World. These communities gradually developed local subsistence strategies that formed the basis for later stratified societies. While the dating of these migrations has often been the focus of significant research, more recently the processes of migration have taken a more central role (Des Lauriers 2011).

Des Lauriers (this volume) provides an overview of issues surrounding the initial entry from Asia via a coastal route along the North Pacific continental edge. The first people on the American continents may have hailed from the shores of the Western Pacific Rim traveling along a coastal route, perhaps before the "ice-free" corridor became available for communities who came into the New World through the terrestrial routes via Beringia (Davis et al., 2019). Genetic and craniofacial evidence further reinforce some of these archaeological findings (Seguchi and Quintyn this volume). The increasing likelihood of an aquatic migration indicates a sophistication of *H. sapiens* to be able to travel great distances using early watercraft and exploiting a diversity of marine resources. People migrating into the Americas were not a tabula rasa; they brought with them their imagination, ingenuity, and funds of knowledge that they adapted, modified, and improved as they travelled along the new coastal landscapes (Des Lauriers, 2009, 2010; Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 1992).

The importance of watercraft to the initial populations, provided a technology and concomitant knowledge that would later enhance the abilities of Mesoamerican societies to themselves establish long distance trade routes, prestige goods economies, and a more rapid transference of ideas throughout Mesoamerica and beyond. In Mesoamerica, these civilizations developed, alongside their complex

technology, systems of ideas that were made manifest in strategies of landscape modification and urbanization. Sugiyama's introduction particularly emphasizes the central role of monuments that, throughout the world, had multiple functions and for millennia, served as markers of developing cognitive frameworks through which they understood the outside world (nature, time, and space), religious thought, and social organization. Using the case of Teotihuacan, he ponders why Teotihuacanos created monumental constructions (metaphorically seen as "sacred mountains"), and the material correlates of bio-cultural evolutionary trajectories.

While the concept of a sacred mountain has global manifestations (Eliade 1959), López Austin (this volume) expounds on the Mesoamerican variant of the "sacred mountain" at various religious centers. López Austin carefully frames the Mesoamerican ontology underlying the cosmologies commonly shared among diverse indigenous groups that synthesized the concept of the "sacred mountain" as a metaphor for the center of universe. Although Mesoamerica shows great diversity in terms of geography, ecology, climate, cultures, languages, and material culture, all of which could have easily functioned as barriers, instead we see a rather consistent conception of time and space. The "sacred mountain" played a special role serving as an *axis mundi*, centering the world, unifying the various layers of the cosmos, and anchoring the urban landscape with material and deeply sacred points of reference. Mesoamerican architecture, colossal sculptures, murals, other types of fine arts, and iconographic/epigraphic records suggest that the concept of the "sacred mountains" persisted for three millennia at least and possibly into contemporary times (See García-Des Lauriers this volume).

Some of the earliest fully formed conceptions of the Mesoamerican "sacred mountain" date back to Olmec

times. Cyphers (this volume) convincingly explains how San Lorenzo became one of earliest metaphoric manifestations of the “sacred mountain.” Swampy terrains in the wetlands were selected for their natural qualities and given symbolic significance and consequently becoming a populous center integrating locational advantages for subsistence and transportation routes. Powerful and consistent messages about the cosmic view of time, space and nature were evinced by the Olmec colossal sculptural programs and fine arts. The Olmec, in this important place, built an innovative monumental center on an unprecedented scale. Monumental architecture embodied the metaphor of the “sacred mountain;” one that endured throughout Mesoamerica for millennia. These “sacred mountains” became the *mise en scène* for the performance of rulership and its related sacred honor system that consolidated the hierarchical social structure (Tsukamoto this volume). Olmec rulers became, as Cyphers notes, “intermediaries between the earthly surface, the gods and the forces of the Universe associated with Sky, Earth and Underworld.”

From these Olmec origins, urban centers throughout Mesoamerica further developed, modified, and reimagined the “sacred mountain,” in part inspired by the local landscape, but also incorporating a local architectural vernacular as well. Monte Albán is another well-preserved example of primary development through niche construction in a somewhat closed natural/social environment (Robles this volume). From its early phases, Monte Albán became an eminent symbolic center with monumental buildings on the summit of 500 meters high on the hill tops. Summarizing distinctive archaeological features of the Monte Albán complex, Robles explains the long adaptation process and varied creative strategies of niche construction programs. She suspects that through the unification of villages, Monte Albán functioned, not as a single “sacred mountain”, but a group of “sacred

mountains” combined to consolidate growing ruling classes. Supported by the results of on-going research at Atzompa, Robles demonstrates how an honor system that originated at Monte Albán was expanded among aligned “sacred mountains,” and permeated into local contexts within the Oaxaca valley.

At the great metropolis of Teotihuacan, Gómez and Gazzola (this volume) focus on the changing social contexts of the Citadel with its main temple, the Feathered Serpent Pyramid, one of the largest monumental complexes at this urban center. They describe the astonishing discovery of an ancient tunnel 15 meters under the monument, and discuss its possible significance and changing functions through the early foundation period. Based on extensive excavation data and materials recovered in the tunnel, they suggest that the sacred cave functioned as a ritual space, possible funeral deposit for rulers, and as part of an ancestor cult. Their data expands on the previous extensive research conducted by Sugiyama (2005), who analyzed the complex symbolism of this building in light of iconographic evidence from its sculpted façade and an extensive set of burial offerings discovered in the Feathered Serpent Pyramid. The reenactment of the creation myth in this “sacred mountain” illustrates the deep roots of cosmogonic thought shared by Mesoamerican communities. The ancient tunnel, a symbolic cave is explained as a ritual place of political power-transmission, funeral ceremonies, and possible burial of rulers, but also is the point of entry to the warehouse of riches at the interior of the mountain as described by López Austin (this volume).

Volcanoes as living mountains whose creative and destructive forces have shaped landscapes, settlements, and histories have often inspired Mesoamerican peoples’ awe and been sites of pilgrimage and veneration (Gill and Keating, 2002; Henderson, 2016; Plunket and Uruñuela, 2002; Sheets, 2006). Uruñuela and Plunket (this volume)

propose that the possible eruption of the volcano Popocatepetl during the first century CE may have triggered the erection of the Great Pyramid in Cholula, a completely man-made “sacred mountain.” Its final form represents the largest pre-Columbian monument by volume in the New World. The monument shows morphological variation and complexity that indicate multiple functions. Using solid archaeological data, they propose two meanings of this grand “sacred mountain.” First as a mountain connected to the watery underworld and the ancestors, and Popocatepetl as a symbol of fire and cosmic center. Based on an analysis of the pyramid’s morphology, they proposed that the monument served as the site of collective rituals that involved the bulk of the local population, and that the monumental construction was an unfinished project, always under construction.

On the Pacific coast of Chiapas, Cerro Bernal, the location of a number of important sites including Los Horcones an Early Classic center with economic and ideological ties to Teotihuacan, was a natural “sacred mountain” upon which man-made “sacred mountains” were erected (Garcia-Des Lauriers 2007, 2020). Garcia-Des Lauriers (this volume) points out that beyond serving as a strategic location where terrestrial and coastal trade routes were controlled, this ritual center profoundly embodied the Mesoamerican concept of the “sacred mountain.” Using archaeological, iconographic, ethnohistoric and ethnographic data, she shows that this mountain on the southern side of the Pacific Coastal plain, drew the attention of Teotihuacanos also for its ideological potency and its characteristics that evoked a terrestrial paradise, not unlike Tlalocan. Its dramatic peak draws the rain clouds whose moisture fed the Río Horcones and the estuaries at its foothills making it an ideal water mountain—*an altepetl*. Exactly the same metaphoric landscape can be observed at Teotihuacan in the Moon Plaza and Cerro Gordo whose

peak draws the rain clouds that provide precipitation to the Teotihuacan valley. It is thus no surprise that Stela 3, carved with a Teotihuacan-style Tlaloc, was originally located in Group F at Los Horcones, a group which is a provincial tribute to the Plaza of the Moon (García-Des Lauriers, 2007, 2012, 2016).

“Sacred Mountains,” both natural and built landscapes are deeply shaped and shape the lives of agents through the performance of small daily rituals and large-scale public performances. Tsukamoto (this volume) addresses the practice of rituals stressing the critical role of interactions between performers and audience especially those taking place in plazas. Tsukamoto zooms in on architectural complexes and tries to understand practices taking place in the plazas, attached to those monumental complexes. Plazas are defined in many ways by their relation to pyramids and other monuments, not unlike highland valleys are in part defined by their relation to mountain landscapes. Tsukamoto notes that a deeper understanding of ritual performances from El Palmar, a Maya center that flourished during CE 250-900, serves to elucidate the politico-social negotiations between governing entities and intermediate elites. Evidence from historical narratives at the site speak of complex histories of connections and conflicts negotiated in part through feasting and campaigns for warfare, critical factors for complex societies. Kings’ theatrical performances at the plaza-monument complex at El Palmar served to enact the sacred underpinnings of Maya rulership.

Using data from Chichen Itza, Stanton, et al. (this volume) focus on how ancient Maya communities utilized collective memory and imagination to recreate, in their architecture and iconography, elements of Teotihuacan ideology at this Late Classic Maya center several centuries removed from the great central Mexican metropolis. The artistic connections between Chichen Itza and Central

Mexican art have often been linked to Toltec connections. However, Stanton et al. (this volume) position the Maya as more actively involved in adopting elements of accumulated knowledge and ideas crystalized earlier at Teotihuacan. Concepts such as the solar paradise, flower mountain, and butterfly warrior imagery were given new life at this Maya center.

Mesoamerican people enacted the sacred landscape through rituals conducted in the plazas and on artificially constructed “sacred mountains”, however they also journeyed in pilgrimage to visit “sacred mountains.” Palka, in his contribution to this volume, explores the enduring role of pilgrimage in Mesoamerica for the last several thousand years using archaeological, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic perspectives. He stresses that agents had to travel together to “sacred mountains” to communicate with animistic or ancestral forces. Pilgrimage consists of a journey to a significant landscape feature, such as mountain, cave, spring or ancient shrine to carry out rituals, leave offerings, and to interact with spiritual forces in their dwelling. Pilgrimage has been described as a “kinetic ritual” (Turner and Turner, 1978, p. xiii), where agents in motion whether in long distance travel or in processions in plazas evoke the dynamism of the cosmos as embodied by the world trees’ double helix shape (See López Austin this volume). Palka presents pilgrimage as creating world balance and promoting community solidarity, ultimately accentuating the power and status of authorities and social organizations in Mesoamerica.

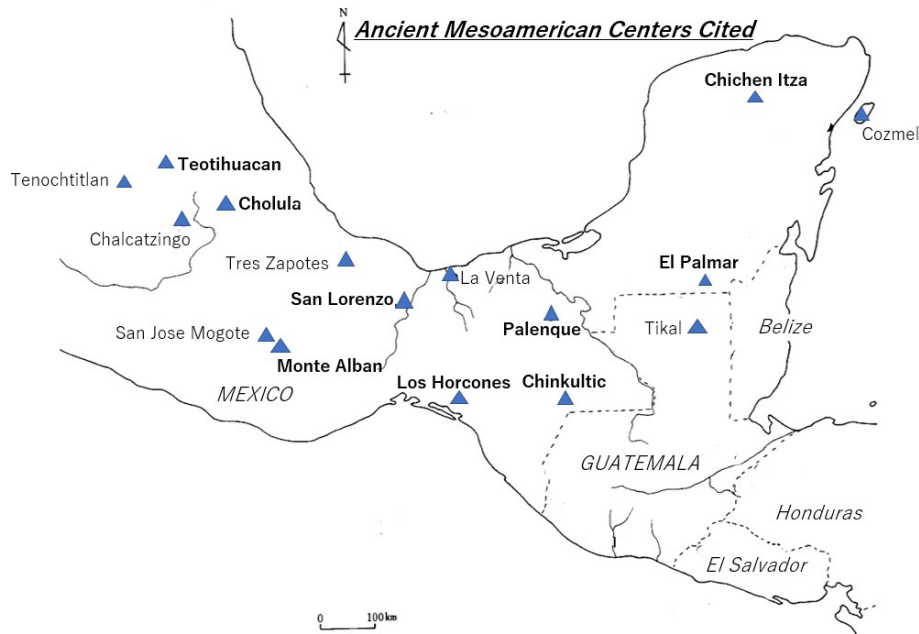
Pilgrimages were not the only journeys undertaken by agents in Mesoamerica. Death brought with it a journey of the soul into the underworld. Astor-Aguilera provides ample evidence and insightful perspectives about very complicated funerary practices in Mesoamerica. Through ethnographic, ethnohistorical, and archaeological inferences dealing with bone treatment, cremation,

exhumation, mortuary bundling, trophy heads, funerary rites, reuse of human bones, etc., he discusses the interrelation between the living and the dead demonstrating how symbolically and deeply people created cosmologies including conceptions of the Mesoamerican Underworld. Anthropological investigations confirm that biological death does not mean the end of the spirit. Using comparative examples, Astor-Aguilera insists that life continues and regenerates. The body-bones-spirit conceptually connect to nature, fertility, and power controlled reciprocally through social actions.

The chapters in this section make clear that Mesoamerican cosmology and conceptions of the “sacred mountain” have a deep and complex history. From the earliest people traveling along the coast to the rise of urban Pre-Columbian centers, the reciprocal engagements between people and landscape framed a discursive relationship that was materialized in the shape of cities, heights of monumental architecture, and replicated through rituals public, private and kinetic. The simultaneously developed and shared niche construction of the “sacred mountain” and related ideological worlds in coastal wetlands, at the base, hilltop, or in the lake in the Central Mexican highlands provide insight into the mechanisms linking brain-mind-body and environments. Peoples’ mental power and collective actions helped them overcome hard environmental conditions. Future interdisciplinary research will continue to engage with the themes presented preliminarily at this conference and build on collaborations with experts of evolutionary anthropology, physical biology, neurosciences, evolutionary psychology, and archaeology. These proceedings represent only the first of what we hope will be many multidisciplinary, international engagements in research, collaboration, and publications that emerge from this “Out of Eurasia” program.

Figure Part II.1.

Ancient Mesoamerican Centers Cited



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