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O N E
Introduction

PURPOSES OF THE BOOK

This volume deals with Late Postclassic (AD 1300–1523) developments in the Naco valley, northwestern Honduras, based on studies carried out at Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306. Consideration of this material is designed to redress three imbalances. The first two are spatial and temporal in scope, whereas the third pertains to the realm of archaeological concepts. Southeast Mesoamerica (adjoining portions of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), we argue, has suffered from benign neglect by archaeologists, especially when compared with the much better studied Maya lowlands immediately to the west. This is especially the case for the last Precolumbian centuries, which comprise the least understood portion of the entire sequence. The research reported herein is intended to help fill in these gaps in our knowledge, although it is no more than a step in that direction.

The conceptual issue we consider relates to how that culture history might be profitably understood. In this instance we contend that traditional approaches to explanation in archaeology have stressed the causal importance of processes related to such structural variables as the physical environment, power relations, and ideology. People have generally been viewed as pushed

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along by historical forces they do not control or fully understand. When questions of agency are addressed in Southeast Mesoamerica in particular, they are generally limited to the machinations of elites. The actions taken by rulers of Classic period (AD 200–900) lowland Maya states, in particular those centered on Quirigua and Copan, are especially highlighted for their causal significance throughout the region.

Structural forces certainly do play roles in channeling human action, and elites can exercise outsized influence on the lives of those they rule. Nevertheless, we propose that these actors and processes by themselves do not account for the sequence of events reconstructed for the Naco valley or for the diverse trajectories of culture change, the details of which are emerging from ongoing studies throughout Southeast Mesoamerica. The goal-seeking behaviors of diverse actors, including but not restricted to elites, must be taken into account in explaining these events. We offer suggestions as to how this might be accomplished and then apply these ideas to the study of power contests in the Late Postclassic Naco valley.

This chapter summarizes briefly how the Naco valley investigations fit within, and contribute to, our evolving understanding of Southeast Mesoamerican prehistory. Of particular concern is establishing how we assigned the materials covered here to the Late Postclassic phase. This discussion is followed by a brief synopsis of the theoretical perspective we are espousing and the way it will be used to interpret Late Postclassic developments in the basin. The conceptual and culture-historical arguments offered here are meant as hypotheses that might profitably be applied in future studies both within Southeast Mesoamerica and beyond its borders. As will be made clear, we began our study of the Naco valley's late prehistory unprepared for what we would find (notwithstanding Anthony Wonderley's excellent published account [1981] of his research at the site of Naco itself). The ad hoc, sometimes stumbling course of these investigations followed from our unfamiliarity with Late Postclassic material and cultural forms, as well as assumptions we had about developments pertaining to that phase. We hope the information provided herein will help dispel some of those unwarranted presuppositions while alerting others to the exciting possibilities of studying the Late Postclassic in Southeast Mesoamerica.

LATE POSTCLASSIC POLITICAL FORMATIONS IN SOUTHERN MESOAMERICA

Southern Mesoamerica, including the Maya highlands and lowlands along with bordering areas to the southeast, is generally characterized during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries as a politically balkanized landscape situated on the margins of the expanding Mexica empire (e.g., Sharer and Traxler

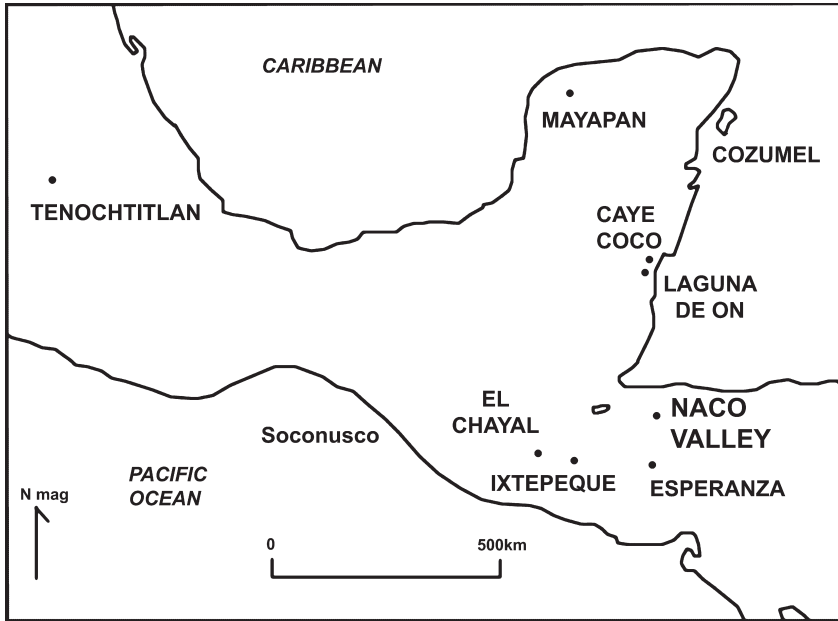


FIGURE 1.1 *Map of Mesoamerica showing major sites and areas mentioned in the text*

2006; figure 1.1). Efforts to create centralized, hierarchically structured realms here were variously successful, but the results were always fragile. By 1462 the sizable domain focused on Mayapan in northeastern Yucatan had fragmented into roughly sixteen variably well-defined and well-structured diminutive political units (Kepecs and Masson 2003: 41–42; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2009). The contemporary, relatively small Quiche and Cakchiquel realms in the Guatemalan highlands were threatened by combinations of internal struggles and external threats (Braswell 2003a; Carmack 1981).

Leaders of these fractious polities participated in shared symbolic systems that facilitated cross-border interactions and the exchange of goods, ideas, and people (Smith 2003b). One of the most prominent of these widespread conceptual structures is glossed as the “Quetzalcoatl cult.” This religion apparently originated at Chichen Itza in the Epiclassic (AD 700–900) and had spread throughout most of the Maya region by the Late Postclassic (Ringle, Gallareta Negron, and Bey 1998). As the name implies, the cult was centered on the eponymous, multifaceted deity. Widespread participation in this and other religious systems (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Rathje and Sabloff 1973) encouraged the development of an overarching cultural framework expressed through a repertoire of ubiquitous symbols that united at least elites and their agents spread over numerous distinct, often warring realms (Boone 2003;

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Boone and Smith 2003; Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Masson 2003a; Rathje and Sabloff 1973). Itinerant traders also penetrated political boundaries that linked populations in different portions of southern Mesoamerica both to each other and to people living to the south in lower Central America and north into the Mexica empire (Berdan 2003b).

Where Southeast Mesoamerica in general, and Naco in particular, fit within this pattern remains unclear. The little information available on the area during the last prehistoric centuries suggests that populations in the Southeast were relatively small and divided among diminutive realms riven by few hierarchical distinctions (Black 1995; Chamberlain 1966; Dixon 1989; Fowler 1989; Pinto 1991; Weeks, Black, and Speaker 1987; Wonderley 1985). Late Postclassic occupation seems so dispersed throughout Southeast Mesoamerica for several reasons, many of which have to do with the nature of the material remains and modern research priorities. The little work done on the area and the time period strongly suggests that most Late Postclassic habitations and outbuildings were made largely of perishable materials and raised directly on ancient ground surface (Andres and Pyburn 2004). Evidence of these occupations is therefore very difficult to identify during survey save in areas that have been recently plowed and where ground surface is not obscured by vegetation (e.g., Voorhies and Gasco 2004). Even the relatively sizeable buildings at political capitals are largely made of earth and are modest in comparison to their counterparts at earlier centers. These constructions are particularly vulnerable to such modern processes as plowing and house construction, disappearing rapidly in the face of economic development.

The situation is not helped by continuity in occupation from the Late Postclassic into the modern era. Many late Precolumbian centers support colonial and later occupations, resulting in the obliteration of Late Postclassic remains. Naco is a case in point. Although much of the settlement was still visible when first investigated by William Duncan Strong and his colleagues in 1936 (1938), by the time Wonderley returned to work there in 1977–1979, most of the site core was covered by modern edifices (1981). By 2008, portions of the town not buried beneath houses had been largely transformed by mechanized plowing for tobacco cultivation and construction of a military base. Very little of the ancient site is still visible.

These difficulties have conspired to direct archaeological attention to earlier time periods with more prominent surviving remains. The Late Classic (AD 600–800) and Terminal Classic (AD 800–950) have been particularly singled out for attention. During these intervals, even the smallest settlements are commonly marked by low stone-faced platforms discernible from ground surface. It is far easier, therefore, to reconstruct settlement patterns and political forms when working with such physically salient materials than it is when

dealing with more elusive Late Postclassic remains. This was certainly the case in our investigations within the Naco valley (1975–1979, 1988–1996), which focused primarily on developments transpiring from the seventh through the tenth centuries. In the course of that work, we did locate ten sites outside Naco itself with evidence of Late Postclassic occupation, of which two—Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144—still boasted surface-visible architecture and were of considerable size. Nevertheless, these settlements were found largely in the course of work focused on understanding earlier intervals (see discussion later in this chapter).

There is good reason, therefore, to believe that populations in Southeast Mesoamerica were larger, and their political centers more numerous, than current archaeological reports indicate. Still, the scant ethnohistoric accounts available for the area are consistent in their description of western Honduras and neighboring zones as divided among small-scale political units, or *cacicazgos* (Chamberlain 1966). To be sure, these chronicles are spotty at best and are more concerned with advancing the claims and counterclaims of Spanish conquerors to land and tribute than with describing indigenous cultures and practices. Still, the Iberian interlopers were positively motivated to find and exploit realms encompassing large, well-organized populations. The fact that none are mentioned in even a cursory manner and that western Honduras was treated largely as an area for slaving rather than for systematic exploitation through the use of Indian labor strongly indicates that indigenous political systems across the area were small and simply structured (Sherman 1978).

The site of Naco stands out against this backdrop as both a major population center and an entrepôt within exchange networks linking lower Central America with central Mexico (Chamberlain 1966; Wonderley 1981). Naco was sufficiently important that it attracted the first Spanish conquerors in the area, who sought from the town sustenance and allies in their internecine struggles (Chamberlain 1966). Population estimates for Naco at the time of first Spanish contact range from 8,000 adult men (Sherman 1978: 49) to 10,000 to 200,000 total people (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938: 27). The last of these is almost certainly a great exaggeration, although it is difficult to say what the Spanish meant when referring to “Naco”: was it the settlement that still bears that name, several closely related sites, or the entire “province” of which the Spanish thought Naco was the capital (Bancroft 1886(2): 61; Henderson 1979: 371; see also Chapter 6 of this volume)? The latter may have extended into the Sula Plain lying 15 km northeast of the valley (Bancroft 1886(2): 161; Diaz del Castillo 1916: 58; Henderson 1979: 371). In general, it seems likely that the town of Naco housed somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals by 1523.

The relatively few references to Naco in Spanish accounts return consistently to its importance as a center of long-distance trade. Goods moving through

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this entrepôt are thought to have arrived along routes that combined seaborne with overland transport and stretched perhaps as far south as the Pacific Coast of Central America (Wonderley 1981: 27–29). Items involved in these transactions included such preciosities as gold, cacao beans, and feathers (Roys 1972: 55), although how and by whom the transactions were organized are unclear. There is a general sense that Maya merchants based along the shores of the Yucatan peninsula played significant roles in the aforementioned economic networks. These entrepreneurs apparently maintained resident agents in “Honduras” (Scholes and Roys 1948: 84) and sent fifty war canoes to aid their trade partners in an abortive effort to oust Spanish interlopers from the lower Ulua valley early in the Spanish conquest (Chamberlain 1966: 53–57). Naco’s cosmopolitan nature is further suggested by the fact that some of its residents were able to converse directly with the Spaniards’ indigenous central Mexican allies who accompanied the conquerors on their initial forays into the valley (Henderson 1979: 369; Pagden 1971: 607). Such linguistic facility may point to a foreign origin for at least part of the basin’s population (Henderson 1979: 369; Wonderley 1981, 1985) or to a familiarity with languages used widely to conduct trade across much of southern Mesoamerica (Henderson 1979; Wonderley 1981: 28).

Written references to Naco and its commercial significance are more tantalizing than definitive. What little is available on this point suggests that the valley’s Late Postclassic inhabitants were integrated within networks through which goods derived from a wide array of sources moved. To what extent these items played significant roles in local political and economic processes is uncertain, as we cannot discern how the town’s residents might have deployed such assets in support of their own projects. The few published accounts of Naco at the time of the Spanish conquest, therefore, hint at the operation of a dynamic political and economic system but do not allow us to address the basic questions of who was involved in interactions at multiple spatial scales, what resources were marshaled through these webs, and how they were employed in support of political projects enacted across local and interregional expanses. To begin to answer those queries, we must turn to the archaeological record.

HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN SOUTHEAST MESOAMERICA AND THE NACO VALLEY

As noted earlier, there was little archaeological record to turn to before 1977. Naco valley prehistory, as was the case throughout most of Southeast Mesoamerica, was virtually unknown prior to the initiation of systematic fieldwork in the area in the late 1960s (Baudez and Becquelin 1973; Sharer ed. 1978). Pioneering programs of survey, sometimes accompanied by test excavations,

have a long history in the zone, extending back to the late nineteenth century (Canby 1949, 1951; Gordon 1898; Longyear 1944, 1947, 1966; Lothrop 1925, 1927, 1939; Popenoe 1934; Stone 1940, 1941, 1942, 1957; Strong 1935; Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938; Yde 1938; see Glass 1966 for a summary of work conducted in the area up through the mid-twentieth century and Healy 1984 and Sheets 1984 for more recent updates). Naco itself was the focus of one such initial study in 1936 when the Late Postclassic site core was mapped and five of its constructions were excavated to varying degrees (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938: 27–34). None of these early studies, however, gave rise to more detailed and extensive investigations on the scale of those conducted throughout the same period in the Maya area to the west.

The reasons for this neglect are numerous. Prominent among them is the theoretical framework within which much of the pioneering work was conducted. Based on the notion that behavioral variation across space and time could best be described in reference to territorially bounded “culture areas,” early studies in the Southeast were centered on defining the limits of these supposedly distinctive zones. Not surprisingly, the areas that attracted the most attention were those that gave rise to what were taken to be major cultural florescences. Initial investigations throughout Southeast Mesoamerica were therefore designed primarily to define the limits of Maya culture, especially as that culture was manifest in the physically prominent symbols associated with elite behavioral spheres during the tellingly labeled Classic period (AD 200–900; Sharer and Traxler 2006). Any sites that fell outside this charmed circle were relegated to positions of secondary importance vis-à-vis Maya centers, the study of which promised to yield insights into the genesis and operation of this prominent culture. In Honduras, this meant that the lowland Maya capital of Copan was singled out for early and prolonged attention (e.g., Gordon 1896; Longyear 1952; Morley 1920) while other settlements were not. Naco was remembered as a potentially important Late Postclassic commercial center, but it did not pertain to the “right” time period or culture to warrant further study.

Attention gradually shifted to Southeast Mesoamerica as the conceptual frameworks within which archaeological research was conducted changed. Throughout the 1960s there was increasing recognition that cultural boundaries were porous (e.g., Caldwell 1964). At first, this permeability was imagined primarily in reference to trade. Members of no single spatially delimited culture secured all the resources they needed from within their borders (e.g., chapters in Earle and Ericson 1977; Renfrew 1975). Contacts must have been sustained with those living in other areas from which essential commodities could have been obtained. This was especially thought to be the case for large states, such as those found throughout the Classic period Maya lowlands, which were especially in need of foreign goods to sustain their complex and

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energy-expensive political and economic systems. As potential sources of such crucial items, polities in Southeast Mesoamerica might be of some relevance to comprehending developments in better-studied areas to the west.

It was also argued that understanding the origins of Classic era Maya civilization required searching outside the culture area's boundaries for important antecedents (see the review in Sharer and Grove 1989). Recently dated Early and Middle Preclassic (1500–400 BC) Olmec sites on the Mexican Gulf Coast seem to have been home to a “mother culture” from which all later Mesoamerican complex polities, including Maya states, arose. Identifying the territorial and spatial limits of this “Ur culture” became a major priority, pushing research into areas previously beyond the pale of serious investigations. It is no surprise, therefore, that the earliest systematic studies of sites in Southeast Mesoamerica focused on large centers, the long prehistoric occupation sequences of which stretched well back into the Preclassic (Bauz and Becquelin 1973; Canby 1949, 1951; Sharer ed. 1978). At least one of these settlements, Chalchuapa in western El Salvador, attracted attention because it possessed a prominent stone carving in the “Olmec” style (Anderson 1978).

Southeast Mesoamerican cultures may not have been of interest in their own right, but they were drawing researchers in unprecedented numbers for the first time. This is not to say that the area was flooded by eager investigators. The adjoining portions of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala were generally seen as home to cultures that basked in the distant glow of their far better-known Maya neighbors (Schortman and Urban 1986, 1994). The central work of studying the rise and fall of ancient states still took place primarily at lowland Maya centers dating to the second century BC through the tenth century AD and not within the much smaller realms existing on their edges. The very designation of Southeast Mesoamerica as the “Southeast Maya Periphery” (e.g., Urban and Schortman 1986) reflects the marginal status attributed to the relevant cultures in ancient interaction networks and scholarly debates. Still, the times and research priorities were changing, and new information on Southeast Mesoamerica's diverse people has been growing considerably from the late 1960s onward.

RECENT RESEARCH IN THE NACO VALLEY

It is under the conditions sketched here that John Henderson initiated systematic investigations in the Naco valley in 1974 (1979; Henderson et al. 1979). The Naco valley encompasses roughly 96 km² and is watered by the Rio Chamelecon, which trends southwest-northeast across the basin. Overall, the Chamelecon drains an area of 4,350 km², running 256 km from its headwaters on the southwest to its junction with the Rio Ulua near the Caribbean

coast (Kirshen and Sprang 2005). Within the Naco valley, the Chamelecon is fed by eight perennial and seven seasonal tributaries that issue from the surrounding slopes of the Sierra de Omoa, which delimit the basin on all sides. The valley bottom is 100–200 m above sea level and comprises a flat to gently rolling landscape made up of the Chamelecon's current and former terraces. Approximately 80 percent of this terrain consists of fertile Mollisols capable of supporting productive agriculture (Anderson 1994; Douglass 2002: 22–23). The remainder is divided between Entisols and Oxisols, the last of which is marginal at best for crop growth (Anderson 1994; Douglass 2002: 22–23). The sites of Naco and PVN 144 occupy Mollisols, whereas the soils on which Site PVN 306 was raised were not classified (Douglass 2002: 24). Assessments of land use during 1988 and 1990, coupled with local informant reports, suggest that the river terrace supporting the latter settlement was capable of sustained cropping in the past.

The primary restriction on ancient agriculture in the Naco valley and its environs was access to sufficient water (Anderson 1994; Douglass 2002: 22–25; Zuniga 1990). As of the late twentieth century, all of the rivers crossing the basin cut deep beds, making irrigation difficult without the use of mechanized pumps. There are no signs of channels by which water might have been redirected from these streams to agricultural fields dating to any period, and it is highly unlikely that they existed. Occupants of the Naco valley up until the twentieth century, therefore, depended on rain to water their crops. The most current figures indicate that the valley receives, on average, 1,300 mm of precipitation annually, most of it concentrated in May through December (Zuniga 1990). This is sufficient to support at least one harvest in November through December, although a second planting, the *postrera*, can yield crops in May during particularly wet years (informant reports). By the Late Postclassic, therefore, the Naco valley and its environs were capable of supporting sizable populations, as they had since at least the Middle Preclassic (1200–400 BC). There is no indication that climatic or edaphic conditions conspired to reduce the basin's carrying capacity during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries.

The Naco valley is strategically situated athwart several potential communication routes that extend to the southwest and the northeast along the Chamelecon valley. To the northeast lies the Sula Plain, home to sizable Late Postclassic populations reported to have been engaged in long-distance trade—especially in cacao—with Yucatecan merchants at the time of the Spanish conquest (Chamberlain 1966: 53–57, 78; Henderson 1979; Roys 1972: 55; Strong 1935: 17; Wonderley 1981: 26–28). The nature of those societies located to the southwest is not well-known from archaeological or ethnohistoric accounts. The report of sizable indigenous settlements at “Quimistlan” and

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“Zula” may refer to areas near the modern communities of Quimistlan and Sula, located 25 km and 40 km southwest of the Naco valley, respectively. As noted previously, early Spanish chroniclers indicated that residents of the Naco valley were in close contact with their neighbors in the Sula Plain and may have exercised political control over some populations in that area (Bancroft 1886(2): 161; Henderson 1979: 371). Leaving the question of suzerainty aside, it is highly likely that occupants of the basin were well situated to engage in commercial and other transactions with the denizens of neighboring zones and took advantage of these opportunities.

The research conducted in the valley proceeded in spurts. Henderson directed investigations there from 1974 through 1979, during which time Wonderley conducted his studies at Naco (1977, 1979) and Urban began her survey of the basin (1975, 1977–1979). We renewed the work from 1988 through 1996. Except for Wonderley’s study, most of the research pursued throughout this period focused primarily on developments that pertained to the Late through Terminal Classic. As noted earlier, such a concentration was strongly facilitated by the physical prominence of the relevant remains. It was also encouraged by the traditional emphasis on developments dating to this period, which coincided with the fluorescence of major states in the Maya lowlands. The population growth and increasing evidence of political complexity seen in the Southeast during the Late and Terminal Classic were long tied to comparable events transpiring to the west (Schortman and Urban 1986). Although we increasingly questioned the causal primacy of “Maya influences” in these seemingly parallel developments (Schortman and Urban 1994), we remained fixated on this period and its fairly easy-to-recognize signs of occupation.

The relevance of these biases and predilections for the present study is that Late Postclassic remains were invariably found by accident. We were well aware of Wonderley’s investigations at Naco and were happy to treat them as a record of Late Postclassic cultural patterns and processes applicable to the valley at large. Naco was the only indigenous center explicitly mentioned by the Spanish in the valley, and there was little incentive to search for more. Any late prehistoric occupation outside Naco was, we assumed, likely to be in the form of scattered farmsteads, the settlements most difficult to locate from surface remains. Fully ten Late Postclassic sites were eventually identified in the course of a total survey of the valley, most of them represented by surface scatters of artifacts found in plowed fields. Further, more intensive work at any of those sites did not promise to yield good returns on the effort involved. The exceptions were Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144.

The former was located during the 1988 survey along the north bank of the Rio Chamelecon (figure 1.2). Site PVN 306 is situated on the east edge of

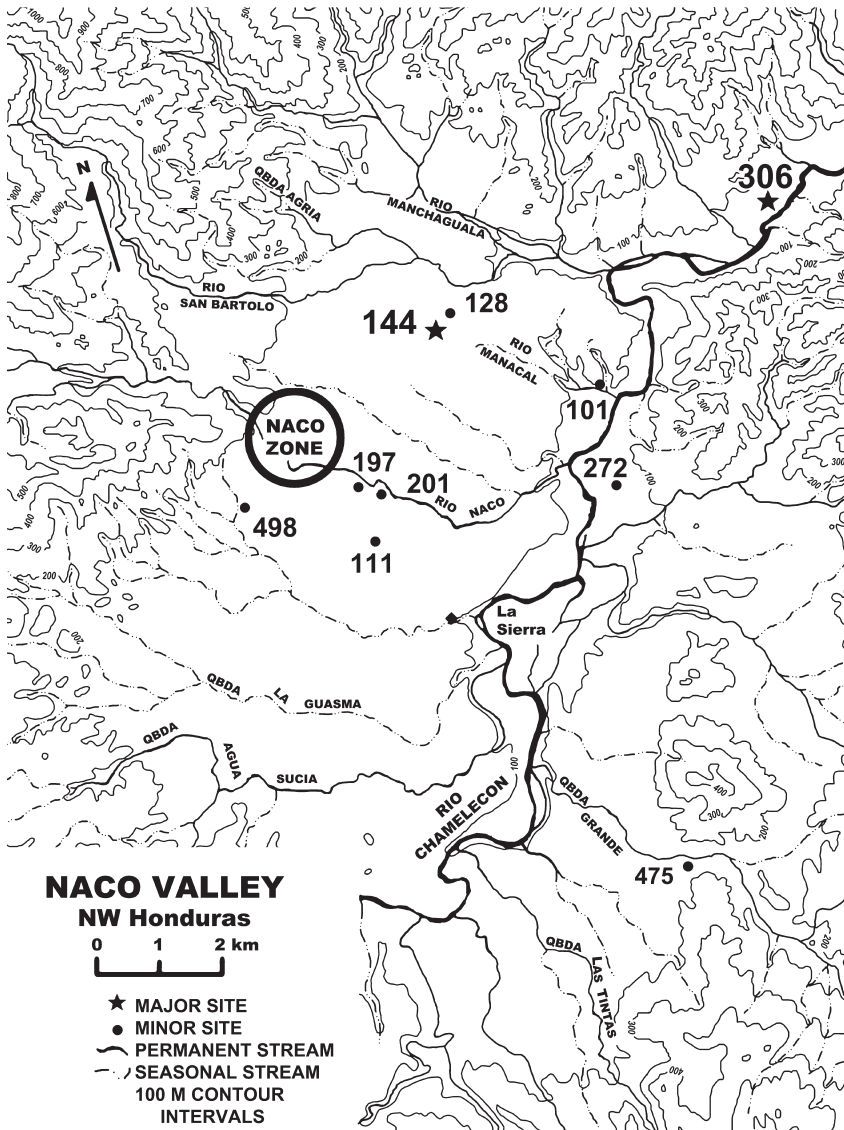


FIGURE 1.2 Map of the Naco valley showing the distribution of known Roble phase (Late Postclassic) settlements. La Sierra on the Rio Chamelecon was the capital of the valley during the Late Classic and shows signs of scant use during the Roble phase.

what was at that time the newly established small town of Brisas del Valle, 2 km northeast of the Naco valley. When first discovered, the settlement's 120 surface-visible buildings and 223 localized artifact scatters were relatively well

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preserved, although commercial cultivation of oranges on its eastern margins and expansion of houses on the west were proceeding apace. Initial digging here in 1988 revealed that while the surviving buildings were raised during the Terminal Classic, Early Postclassic (AD 1100–1300), and Late Postclassic, most dated to the third interval. The latter include the sizable platforms that define Site PVN 306's two adjoining plazas in the site core.

The surprising discovery of a large center contemporary with Naco led us to reevaluate our earlier assumptions about valley prehistory. We especially questioned Naco's absolute dominance within the basin during the last prehistoric centuries. These new questions, coupled with the very likely prospect that the settlement would soon be overwhelmed by plowing and construction, led us to devote much of the 1990 field season to excavating Site PVN 306. In the end, thirty-four of the recorded buildings and nine of the artifact scatters were dug, along with a series of test pits sunk in areas lacking surface evidence of ancient activities (647 m² cleared in all).

Investigations at Site PVN 144, whose nineteen structures and twelve recorded artifact scatters lie between Naco itself and Site PVN 306, were also spurred by accidental discoveries. The settlement had been known since 1978, when it was recorded and mapped during the initial survey (Urban 1986). Our attention turned to Site PVN 144 when, in 1996, it was the focus of a land dispute. One set of claimants, seeking to substantiate their rights to the fields, built houses on the site and cut a road through part of it. These processes brought to light clear signs of a Late Postclassic occupation there, including evidence of relatively large-scale constructions roughly comparable to some of the sizable late prehistoric edifices seen at Naco and Site PVN 306. This date was not suggested by the surface remains, as no artifacts had ever been recovered from the settlement and the general building forms and arrangements were not temporally diagnostic. Given that Site PVN 144 represented yet another unexpected example of late prehistoric occupation in the valley and was threatened with imminent destruction, we excavated seven buildings and six surface-visible artifact scatters here during 1996 (553 m² cleared overall).

Several aspects of this research strategy need to be emphasized. First, there was little strategy involved. We began work in the Naco valley convinced that the eponymous site was the sole focal point of Late Postclassic occupation and hence did not seek any evidence that might contradict that view. What eventually challenged such notions came to light fortuitously, and then the work had to be carried out as quickly as possible in the face of rapidly advancing agents of destruction. These circumstances meant there was little chance of returning to either settlement to pursue issues raised in the initial work; nor did we have the opportunity to examine the sites in as systematic and controlled a manner as we would have liked. The emphasis was on uncovering as much of Late

Postclassic buildings and deposits as time and money allowed. Further, any hope we had of completing analyses of stored materials disappeared when the collection was lost in the wake of Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

This list of limiting circumstances should not be confused with an excuse. We bear full responsibility for the restrictions from which this study suffers. Late Postclassic sites and materials were not foci of our investigations, and their consideration was often rushed and deferred in comparison with the greater time and attention devoted to Late and Terminal Classic remains. We can still learn much from examining the Site PVN 144 and PVN 306 materials, if for no other reason than that they provide some of the brightest spots in the rather dull firmament of late prehistoric data points in Southeast Mesoamerica. What we can take away from such a disquisition is restricted, however, by the nature of the recovery and analysis process, and it would be misleading to ignore these limitations.

CHRONOLOGY

The assignment of major components at Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144 to the Late Postclassic is based on two principal lines of evidence: material similarities, especially as seen in ceramics and architecture, with late prehistoric remains recovered from other portions of southern Mesoamerica; and three C-14 dates obtained from samples closely associated with these materials.

Ceramics

Very little is known concerning Late Postclassic pottery styles throughout Southeast Mesoamerica. The best dated and published relevant collections for the Southeast outside the Naco valley are from the Sula Plain (Wonderley 1985) and the middle Ulua drainage in and around the Late Classic center of Gualjoquito (Schortman et al. 1986; Urban 1993a; Weeks, Black, and Speaker 1987), approximately 15 km northeast and 40 km south of the basin within Honduras, and Chalchuapa, roughly 220 km to the south in El Salvador (Sharer 1978). These materials are supplemented to some extent by reports from survey work conducted east of Naco in the Aguan drainage (Stone 1941, 1957; see figure 1.3 for the location of these and other areas mentioned here). The principal ceramic classes variably represented in these collections are characterized by several surface treatments: red slipping, red painting on natural surfaces, red-painted and incised designs on unslipped vessels, red painting on white slips, and polychrome designs applied over white backgrounds.

Red-slipped vessels are ubiquitous in known Late Postclassic collections, although they are rare along the middle Ulua (Visaina Fine Paste; Urban 1993a)

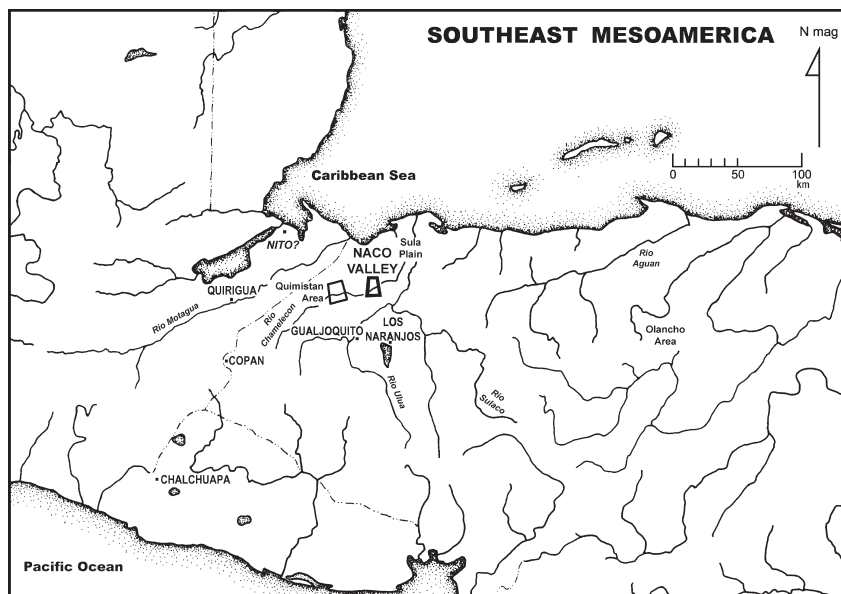


FIGURE 1.3 *Map of Southeast Mesoamerica showing sites and areas mentioned in the text*

and more prevalent in the Naco valley (Algo Red and Salto Red; Urban 1993b: 57–59) and the Sula Plain (Wonderley 1985). At Chalchuapa, Cozatal Hematite Red and Guajoyo Red-brown are comparably prevalent, although some of their number may date to the Early Postclassic (Sharer 1978: 62–63). Associated forms are generally open bowls in all these cases. Red-slipped monochromes are also reported in some numbers from the Agalteca valley, possibly in association with painted bichromes diagnostic of the Late Postclassic (Stone 1957: 67–69, 73).

Both the Naco and Sula valleys possess a distinctive class of ceramics characterized by open bowls, frequently supported by three legs in the form of stylized bird heads, feet, or both. The interiors and exteriors of these vessels are slipped white and decorated with red-painted designs (figures 1.4, 8.1, 8.2). Originally defined as Nolasco Bichrome (Wonderley 1981: 157–172, 1985: 261, 263), other representatives of this class made using a different paste recipe have been recognized at Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306 (glossed as La Victoria Bichrome in these cases; Urban 1993b: 60–61). Designs found in both taxa consist of “X’s,” guilloches, curvilinear and geometric elements, stylized feathers, and “serpent jaws” (Urban 1993b: 57–58; Wonderley 1981: 157–172). Nolasco and possibly La Victoria sherds were earlier classed as Naco Painted Ware (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938: 33–34) and Naco Style Ware (Strong 1957: 67–68). Red-on-white ceramics make up roughly 18 percent of the Naco

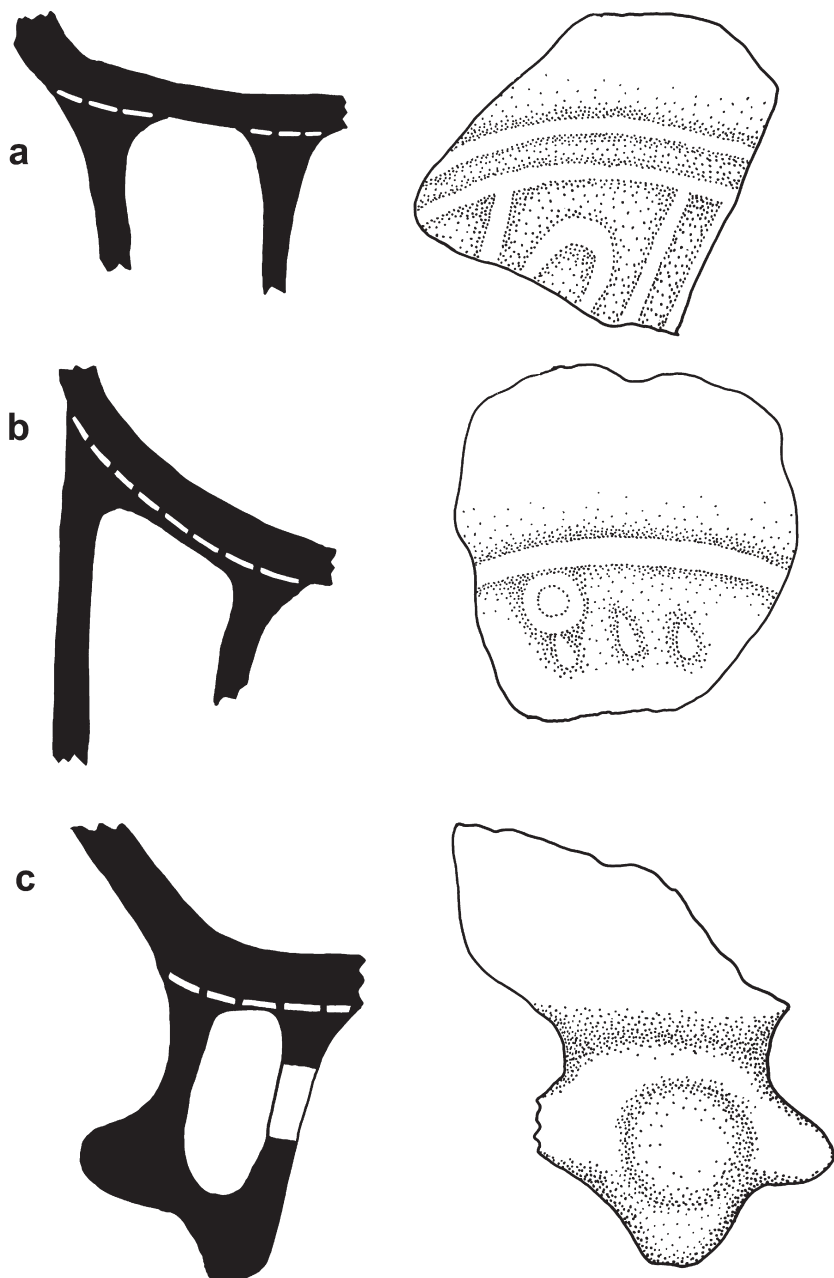


FIGURE 1.4 Selection of diagnostic Naco Viejo Ceramic Complex forms. See also figures 8.1 and 8.2

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Late Postclassic assemblage, 5 percent of the combined collection from Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144, and 4 percent of the El Remolino and Despoloncal ceramics from the Sula Plain (Wonderley 1985). A single sherd from this taxon was found in a very late deposit at Gualjoquito in the middle Ulua drainage.

Similar bichromes are also reported east of the Sula Plain from the Olancho area and Aguan valley (Stone 1941: 89; Wonderley 1981: 165–172, 1985: 264). In the Aguan examples, however, the largely geometric designs are painted in black on a white slip, making them closer to Forastero Bichrome from the Naco valley (Stone 1957: 67–68; see also Urban 1993b: 59; Wonderley 1981: 182–186). The latter type is very rare in the basin at Naco and in the assemblages of Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306.

The greatest variety of late prehistoric polychromes is reported from the site of Naco. Here open bowls decorated with red-and-black painted designs on white-slipped backgrounds make up roughly 1 percent of the collection (classed as Vagando, Cortes, Hidalgo, and Posas Polychromes and Tormenta Trichrome; Urban 1993b: 58–60; Wonderley 1981: 172–176, 186–194; see also Naco Painted Ware, Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938: 33–34; Wonderley included incense burner fragments in these taxa). Examples of these ceramics were recovered in very small amounts from Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144 (0.002% of the combined assemblages), as well as at Despoloncal (Wonderley 1985: 264).

No sherds of this type are known from the middle Ulua, although Doris Stone may have identified a few in the Aguan valley (1957: 67–68). The fifty-one sherds of Chinautla Polychrome reported from Chalchuapa constitute some of the only other vessels decorated in this fashion from Southeast Mesoamerica (Sharer 1978: 65–66). There is a general resemblance between Chinautla vessels and the polychromes found in the Late Postclassic Naco valley; in both instances geometric designs are painted in red and black on the cream-slipped surfaces of generally open bowls. Like Nolasco and La Victoria examples, Chinautla vessels are commonly supported by three modeled legs; it is unclear if the polychromes from the Naco valley were also elevated in this manner. These general resemblances in form and decoration most likely represent common participation in interaction nets through which broadly similar pottery vessels and their canons of decoration moved during the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries across the southeastern and eastern Maya highlands and western Honduras (Sharer 1978: 66; see also Wauchope's "Bright Paint Style," 1970: 108, 110–112). There is no clear evidence that the polychromes in question were made at any of the sites enumerated here.

Red-painted designs on unslipped vessel surfaces are recorded in the middle Ulua assemblage as well as at Chalchuapa. In the former case, sub-hemispherical and flaring-walled bowls, low plates, and jars are decorated with vertical and

diagonal stripes, arcs, and possibly cross-hatching (Quezapaya Red-Painted; Urban 1993b: 168–169). The Chalchuapa examples (Marihua Red-on-Buffer) consist of sub-hemispherical bowls the interiors and exteriors of which are adorned with such geometric figures as spirals, parallel curving lines, and “saw-tooth” designs (Sharer 1978: 63). There are no known counterparts to these vessels in the Naco valley and the Sula Plain, just as jars with simple incised geometric motifs on their low necks have been found to date primarily along the middle Ulua (Masica Incised, Maqueta var.; Urban 1993b: 168). Incising is also noted as a decorative treatment at Chalchuapa, sometimes applied on the red-slipped surfaces of bowls (Cuis Cuis Incised) or their unslipped interior bases (Tasajera Incised; Sharer 1978: 63–64). A very few containers from the Naco valley have evidence of simple incised designs on the interior bases of bowls (Wonderley 1981: 147).

Unslipped ceramics comprise the majority of the assemblages in all of the areas discussed here. Several commonalities in forms and, to a more limited extent, surface treatments link several of these zones, however. Comales are found throughout the collections, as are low-necked jars; the former is a new addition to, or is newly prevalent in, the form repertoire throughout most of Southeast Mesoamerica (Masson 2000a: 117; comales, however, are reported at Chalchuapa from Middle and Late Classic contexts, AD 400–900; Sharer 1978). At least some of the Naco valley and Sula Plain unslipped containers were burnished (Tal Burnished; Urban 1993b; Wonderley 1981: 152–157; 1985, 261). Strong and his colleagues, in fact, remarked that a great many of the sherds from Naco’s Late Postclassic utilitarian ceramics (slipped or unslipped is unclear) were “fairly well polished” (1938: 33). Burnishing of untreated surfaces is not reported elsewhere in the Southeast (Wonderley 1981: 156–157).

Brushing of unslipped vessel surfaces is recorded in both the middle Ulua drainage (Yara Brushed) and the Naco valley (Carbano Brushed). In the former case, a multi-toothed instrument was used to create the desired effect, while Carbano Brushed vessels were apparently finished with something resembling a corn cob (Urban 1993a: 165–166, 1993b: 60). Bowls and jars were decorated in this fashion, and both taxa are relatively well represented in their respective collections. Recurved bowls may have been finished in this way at Chalchuapa (Kanil Unslipped), although it is not certain that brushing constitutes a decorative mode here (Sharer 1978: 64–65).

In general, therefore, Late Postclassic assemblages throughout Southeast Mesoamerica were characterized by certain very general similarities, the most obvious of which are red slipping and the prevalence of low-necked jars, usually unslipped, in various taxa and comales. Less widespread is the variable presence of white-slipped open bowls decorated with designs painted in red and, more

rarely, red and black. The latter containers are found primarily in the Naco and Sula valleys, as is the burnishing of unslipped vessel surfaces. The use of simple brushing as a decorative technique is attested to in the Naco valley, the middle Ulua basin, and possibly at Chalchuapa. Red painting on unslipped surfaces distinguishes assemblages pertaining to the middle Ulua and Chalchuapa, as does the use of incision.

It may well be that there were different ceramic spheres within Southeast Mesoamerica, each set apart from its neighbors by certain distinctive decorative treatments that existed within a framework of broadly comparable formal and stylistic modes, such as red slipping (Rice 1986). The similarities emerging from studies of Naco valley and Sula Plain pottery point to this area as comprising one such sphere (Wonderley 1985: 261), a finding in line with the ethnohistoric reports of close political and economic ties between populations in the two basins (Bancroft 1886(2): 161; Diaz del Castillo 1916: 58; Henderson 1979: 371; Wonderley 1981). Very limited data recovered during early surveys in the Aguan valley and the Olancho area tentatively hint at the inclusion of these zones within the same ceramic sphere as the Naco valley and the Sula basin. The middle Ulua drainage, in contrast, largely stands apart from its near neighbors to the north, sharing relatively few ceramic modes with them. Chalchuapa's occupants, as would be expected given their great distance from the other areas considered here, also likely participated in a distinct ceramic sphere.

Taking a broader view, the stylistic choices made by the Naco valley's denizens resonate with those taken in the Maya highlands and lowlands during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. Specifically, red-slipped monochromes were found widely throughout the eastern and northern Yucatan peninsula at this time, marking a considerable shift from Classic period modes of vessel treatment (Masson 2001; Rice 1983; Smith 1971: 197–199, 220–228; Wonderley 1981). Similarly, white-slipped ceramics decorated with designs painted in red and red and black were recorded over large portions of highland Guatemala and along the base of the Yucatan peninsula during the Late Postclassic (Rice 1983; Wauchope 1970; Wonderley 1981). The motifs employed in these decorative programs are also generally similar, suggesting that Maya peoples were one source of inspiration for the bichromes found in the Naco valley (Wonderley 1981).

Although the situation is less clear, there are also a few hints that the forms of ceramic incense burners used in the late prehistoric Naco valley were derived from, or at least commensurate with, those employed in contemporary Yucatecan realms. In particular, censers decorated with small modeled spikes on their exteriors appear clearly for the first time in the basin now and resemble, in a general sense, those recorded from coeval settlements to the north and

west, as well as from Chalchuapa (Mocal Modeled-appliqué, Sharer 1978: 61). These incensarios, however, are not common in the Naco valley; nor do they take the hourglass form frequently reported from Yucatan (Masson 2000a; Milbrath and Peraza Lope 2003; Smith 1971). Ladle censers, consisting of shallow bowls attached to long, hollow tube handles, are fairly common in the Naco valley collection, as well as throughout Yucatan and at Chalchuapa (Chequezate Unslipped, Sharer 1978: 61). Local antecedents for this form within the basin, where it extends back to at least the Late Classic, raise doubts concerning its foreign inspiration.

In general, therefore, the pottery containers that comprise the Naco Viejo Ceramic Complex broadly resemble their counterparts throughout Southeast and southern Mesoamerica. Such comparisons suggest that the former examples date to the same late period, as do their analogs in the Maya area and closer to home.

Architecture

Distinctive architectural forms found in Naco and at Site PVN 306 also point to participation by residents of these settlements in interaction networks dating to the Late Postclassic. The most notable of these constructions are the circular and cog-wheeled platforms found in the architectural cores of the aforementioned centers. These buildings (Structure 4F-1 at Naco and Structures 306-17, 306-19, and possibly 306-174; see figures 3.6, 3.10, 5.2) are similar to other round constructions reported from across much of the Maya highlands and lowlands immediately prior to the Spanish conquest (Pollock 1936; Ringle, Gallaretta Negron, and Bey 1998; Sidrys and Andersen 1978; see also Wonderley 1981). While round structures have a long history in the Maya lowlands especially, their relative prevalence in the Late Postclassic suggests that these examples served as models for the Naco valley constructions (a point considered in greater depth in chapter 8).

Carbon-14 Assays

The architectural and ceramic similarities outlined here point to a rough contemporaneity between the specified Naco valley materials and those traditionally dated to the Late Postclassic in Southeast and southern Mesoamerica. The chronological placement of the former remains is further bolstered by the results of C-14 assays carried out on three samples recovered together with the aforementioned pottery and architecture (table 1.1).

Lot 144T/004 was retrieved from the top of charcoal-stained earth 0.06 m below the plaster mask that borders, on the south, the western staircase

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ascending Structure 144-8 (see chapter 4). This mask was first raised during the second version of that platform (Structure 144-8-2nd) and was maintained throughout the rest of the edifice's use-life. The intercept of radiocarbon age with the calibration curve provided for lot 144T/004 is AD 1305, placing it near the beginning of the Late Postclassic; the calibrated results with 2-sigma variations are AD 1285–1405. These figures match very well expectations based on artifact samples and building sequences at Site PVN 144.

Lot 306AB/004 is from a shallow midden located north of that center's architectural core. This deposit contained large quantities of artifacts, all of which were assigned to the Late Postclassic on purely stylistic grounds. The calibrated intercept date for the sample is AD 1400, and the 2-sigma span is AD 1275–1450. Lot 306AJ/054, in turn, pertains to debris associated with the final use of Structure 306-128, an apparent elite residence in the eastern principal plaza of the site core (see chapter 3). The calibrated intercept date in this case is AD 1480, with a 2-sigma span of AD 1430–1645. Both results closely coincide with chronological expectations based on artifact analyses and construction histories. Overall, the consistency of the three radiocarbon assays from as many different deposits gives us increased confidence in dating the suite of ceramic and construction styles discussed earlier to the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries.

Summary

Chronological assessments of components at Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144 founded on artifact analyses, architectural sequences and styles, and radiocarbon assessments together indicate that late occupations at these settlements and Naco date to a single Late Postclassic phase within the valley. That interval is herein referred to as the Roble phase. The time range is so narrow, in fact, that it is highly likely that all three settlements were occupied at the same time, with their residents involved in many of the same political networks. This is a basic premise on which this book's discussion is founded.

PERIPHERIES OF PERIPHERIES

As noted earlier, the Late Postclassic Naco valley is doubly peripheral to modern scholarly concerns. This is true spatially, as the basin has traditionally been seen as existing on the margins of major cultural developments to the west and north. It is also the case temporally, in that the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries in southern Mesoamerica are often treated as peripheral to major sociopolitical and cultural transformations that occurred earlier, during the Classic period, and later with the establishment of the Spanish empire (Rice

TABLE 1.1 Carbon-14 assessments relevant to the Naco valley's Late Postclassic

<i>Lot</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Provenience</i>
144T/004	650 ± 40 BP	From immediately beneath a plaster mask on Structure 144-8
306AB/004	590 ± 80 BP	0.22–0.3 m below ground surface in a midden containing solely Late Postclassic materials
306AJ/054	380 ± 50 BP	0.2–0.4 m below ground surface, terminal debris, Structure 306-128

Note: All dates are given in uncalibrated forms as conventional radiocarbon ages followed by a 1-sigma spread (Beta Analytic Laboratory, laboratory numbers Beta-102687, Beta-40952, Beta-40953, respectively). "Lot" refers to the specific collection unit from which a sample was taken; the numeric prefix indicates the site where the material was excavated.

and Rice 2005: 140; see chapters in Kepecs and Alexander 2005 and Smith and Berdan 2003 for strong evidence of contradictory interpretive trends). It is no surprise, therefore, that work in the valley and on the time period has been so sporadic, a tradition to which we also contributed.

As is the case with all peripheries, however, the question immediately arises: peripheral in what ways and to whom (Kohl 1987; Kohl and Chernykh 2003; Schortman and Urban 1994)? Recent, exciting applications of modified versions of World Systems Theory (WST) to late prehistoric Mesoamerica provide some of the most thoughtful answers to that question (Alexander and Kepecs 2005; Kepecs and Kohl 2003; Smith and Berdan 2000, 2003). In this formulation, Naco is often seen as one of a series of *entrepôts*, on the margins of Mesoamerican cores, the residents of which facilitated trade within and across the boundaries of the multicentric Mesoamerican world (Gasco and Berdan 2003: 109; Smith and Berdan eds. 2003: 25). Cozumel, Wild Cane Cay, and El Tigre are among the other contemporary "international trade centers" that functioned in similar ways (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Gasco and Berdan 2003: 109; McKillop 1996; Sabloff and Rathje 1975).

A viewpoint based on WST has the salutary effect of encouraging the investigation of all populations throughout Mesoamerica as simultaneously enmeshed in transactions going on at multiple spatial scales, with the results of one influencing the outcomes of all the others. This very strong advantage, however, is somewhat counterbalanced by the implication that Naco and its fellow *entrepôts* were important *because of* their positions within exchange and communication networks that extended well outside their immediate areas. We are dangerously close here to the argument that it was Naco and its compatriots' political marginality that enabled their economic and cultural importance, that it was their structural position within macro-regional webs that played a major role in determining the course of their late Precolumbian

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histories (Gasco and Berdan 2003: 112). “Marginality,” no longer a pejorative term, still has causal power.

Our own research strategies have suffered from some of these biases. Nevertheless, we have approached the analyses outlined herein with the assumption that, from the perspective of those who lived in the Naco valley during the period AD 1300–1523, the basin was the core of their world. Different segments of that population were variably aware of events occurring in, and ideas derived from, distant locales and had differential access to goods obtained from foreign sources. They also likely made selective use of their own history, recalling some aspects while neglecting others. We very much doubt, however, that they were overwhelmed by either recollections of past greatness or the pretensions and proclaimed capacities of distant potentates. The valley’s late prehistoric occupants showed no signs of acknowledging their peripherality to anyone past or present or of allowing that perception of marginality to determine their actions. Rather, we will argue that Roble phase Naqueños employed conceptual and tangible resources derived from the past and the present, from local and distant origins, to seek their own objectives in cooperation with some and competition with others. In pursuing these projects with varying degrees of success, they created their own version of the Late Postclassic Mesoamerican world in which foreign goods and concepts were implicated in local processes (Freidel 1985: 308; Lycett 2005: 101). That iteration was no less vibrant and dynamic for being constructed on the human scale of a 96 km² valley than were those renditions acted out elsewhere on grander stages within the isthmus. It is to the reconstruction of that vital world created and sustained by the interactions of variably well-connected and well-informed Naqueños that this book seeks to contribute.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

To gain an understanding of how the Naco valley’s inhabitants reconstituted the Mesoamerican world in their daily lives, we must attend to the ways such broad processes were refracted through the experiences of specific social groups. We also need to focus on an aspect of their lives in which these general processes were arguably relevant. We have therefore developed a theoretical framework that centers attention on the manner in which the basin’s late prehistoric occupants employed foreign as well as local, material, and conceptual resources in their contests for power. Our concern with politics is not meant to imply that this aspect of life is somehow more significant than any other. Nor are we arguing for a narrow focus on power. Rather, economic processes of production, distribution, and consumption will be considered along with religious practices and concepts of history. The point is that making sense of the

material in hand requires concentrating attention on some themes that help us see connections among seemingly disparate pieces of information. Many such themes could undoubtedly be selected. We have chosen power relations, as they are particularly amenable to investigation using data pertaining to the Naco valley's Roble phase. When we discuss economics, ritual, and history, therefore, it will be to relate them to political competitions.

The central premise of this approach, considered in greater detail in chapter 2, is that basic elements of political structure—such as office, rank, status, and role—influence human behavior only to the extent that they and their relations are enacted in the numerous events through which power is wielded by goal-seeking individuals (Mauss 2007; Monaghan 1995; Schortman 2008). Such events unfold within fields of expectations, resource distributions, and patterned interpersonal connections that come down from previous generations. The extent to which these inherited structural components are explicitly codified within institutional arrangements can vary through time and across domains within a political field. No matter how fixed and enduring structural features may appear, however, their form, reproduction, and capacity to enable and constrain behavior rely on how and to what extent their premises are acted upon (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Mauss 2007; Monaghan 1995; Schortman 2008). Structure and event, therefore, are inseparable aspects of the same social totality (Mauss 2007; Monaghan 1995; Schortman 2008). The former is forever vulnerable to the latter; structural principles can be, and are, modified in the course of their instantiation by self-interested agents pursuing their own goals.

Seeking power requires mobilizing allies within networks to marshal resources in support of political projects. Such efforts, in turn, are countered by opponents organized within their own nets to secure the assets needed to conduct their endeavors in support of their own ends. Political formations, therefore, are rarely the products solely of centrally imposed designs. Rather, they are the joint creations of those operating together, if rarely in unison and harmony, and are continuously subject to change as the fortunes of one faction are advanced at the expense of another's (Brumfiel 1992; Brumfiel and Fox 1994). To describe political structures, therefore, we must specify who was involved in which networks, what resources were mustered within the webs, which projects were fueled by these assets, and how and to what extent they contributed to the achievement of political aims. That is what we attempt to accomplish here.

Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the basic material and behavioral patterns identified during the investigations of Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306 in the Naco valley. We concentrate here on reconstructing the webs in which the residents of these settlements operated during the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries and the various projects through which the relevant nets were instantiated. Chapter 5

considers materials reported from Naco itself in the same light. We review what Wonderley (1981, 1985) and other researchers at the site (Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938) uncovered and how these findings relate to the outcomes of more recent work at Roble phase Naco valley settlements. The nature of power relations at all three centers is outlined in chapter 6, while chapters 7–9 discuss the ways various agents championed and challenged hierarchy. Each of these last three chapters focuses on a specific set of resources that figured in late prehistoric power contests: craft products, religious symbols, and concepts of history. The general arguments advanced throughout the volume are summarized in chapter 10, as are implications of this study for understanding political relations generally.

Attention here centers on describing, not explaining, Roble phase political formations in the Naco valley. The main reason for this choice is ignorance. Very little is known about how Late Postclassic populations in Southeast Mesoamerica organized their political relations. In fact, outside of the Naco valley, only a handful of sites found in this broad area and dating to the last Precolumbian centuries have been investigated and reported (Sharer ed. 1978; Weeks, Black, and Speaker 1987; Wonderley 1985). Providing detailed descriptions of the political structures that took shape throughout the zone is therefore an essential first step to understand the varied ways power contests were waged, what their outcomes were, and how they might have been interrelated. As it stands, it is difficult at this juncture to know what it is that we wish to explain, let alone how causation might be specified.

The paucity of information on how political developments played out in different areas is especially problematic in that power is contested through networks operating on multiple spatial scales that extend from the immediate domestic group to webs that link participants scattered over great distances (see chapter 8). It is never possible to describe all of the relevant connections by which resources were mobilized in support of some objectives and in opposition to the agendas of others. Still, the paucity of data pertaining to developments occurring over vast expanses of Southeast Mesoamerica at this time renders explanations that incorporate interconnections among populations speculative at best. In the absence of such information, any effort to account for why power relations took the forms they did in the Roble phase Naco valley must remain partial. This restriction will not stop us from offering suggestions as to how and why power was secured by some and not by others and what factors limited the expression of hierarchy in the late prehistoric Naco valley. Such explanatory forays are offered as hypotheses that may suggest fruitful areas of further inquiry, not as definitive accounts of past realities.

The book is also an experiment in using a “network perspective” on interpersonal relations to describe political structures within purely prehistoric

contexts. As argued in chapter 2, we are convinced that this vantage point offers a productive foundation from which to evoke the contingent, fluid interactions that shape, and emerge from, human behavior. Considerable effort is therefore devoted to outlining the ways such an approach might be applied with the hope that it will inspire others to think along similar lines and refine its premises. We do not contend that there is one right or best way to approach studying the past in general and political formations in particular. Instead, we argue that concentrating on the ways people actually wage political contests close to the ground provide a different perspective on these struggles and their results than does one that privileges the operation of broad structural variables in determining human action. The two viewpoints are complementary, although the potential utility of the former has yet to be evaluated fully. This volume contributes to that effort.

A final caveat is that every effort is made to understand political events and formations in the Late Postclassic Naco valley in their own terms. There is a strong temptation when working in Southeast Mesoamerica to apply behavioral models drawn from the much richer ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological datasets available for the neighboring Maya area to our more poorly understood materials. Attending to this siren song is encouraged by the reasonable argument that there were considerable cultural continuities across these lands throughout prehistory. Maya cultural practices and sociopolitical formations were therefore probably generally analogous to those seen in Southeast Mesoamerica. The problem lies in identifying when drawing inspiration from Maya patterns ceases being a source of useful insights and starts predetermining results. Imposing models derived from outside the research zone runs the real risk of submerging behavioral and cultural variations within a homogenizing view based on investigations conducted in the better-known area. This is especially the case in late prehistoric Southeast Mesoamerica, where the available data are not usually robust enough to challenge such “Maya imperialism” (Euraque 2004).

We are not arguing that information pertaining to Late Postclassic developments in the Maya lowlands, or in any portion of Mesoamerica, is irrelevant to understand power contests in the Naco valley; far from it. As many have effectively argued (e.g., Kepecs 2005; Kepecs and Alexander 2005; Smith and Berdan 2003), the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries encompass a period throughout the isthmus when interregional contacts were particularly intense. No one area’s developments can be fully understood in isolation from events initiated elsewhere within this extensive web. Nonetheless, these cross-border transactions occurred, and had their impacts, through the agency of people operating simultaneously within parochial as well as more expansive nets. It is critical, therefore, to model local processes as products of human actions taken

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within distinctive historical streams that were affected, but not determined, by long-distance interactions, such as trade and inter-elite alliances. There may well be similarities in the ways residents of different portions of southern Mesoamerica drew foreign assets into local power contests, but such commonalities are best recognized after investigations in a number of areas have been completed rather than being imposed from the start. We will therefore draw on findings from other segments of southern Mesoamerica, especially the Maya lowlands and highlands, in reconstructing the course of political history in the Naco valley from the fourteenth through early sixteenth centuries. Every effort is made, however, to see the valley's denizens for who they were: participants with diverse viewpoints who actively construed their relations with other peoples, including the Maya, in ways that made sense to them.