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# SOUTHEASTERN MESOAMERICA

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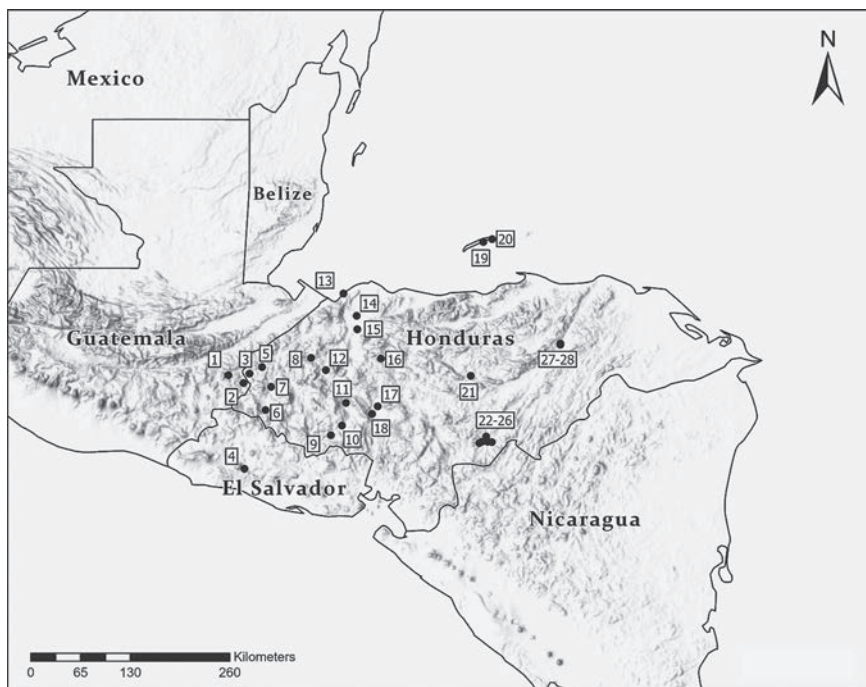
Southeastern Mesoamerica has for decades been a shifting archaeological and geographical concept used to refer to an area that encompasses modern-day eastern Guatemala, western Honduras, and most of El Salvador (figure 1.1). While even the earliest definitions were tenuous, as detailed below, decades of sustained research have complicated, and thus advanced, our understanding of the region even further. As evidence of this progress, the chapters in this volume do not espouse a singular view of the region or rely on one particular theory or methodological approach to the study of its past. Rather, these chapters draw on new concepts, techniques, or records, both archaeological and historic, to add to the increasingly complex picture of the lives of the indigenous peoples who inhabited the region and who continue to call it home today. By expanding our view deeper into the past than previous volumes on the subject and drawing out the histories of the region into the period after European contact, together the chapters in the volume trace the related processes of interaction, resilience, and change that shaped the trajectories of the varied indigenous groups in the region over millennia. The underlying goal of the volume as a whole remains similar, however, to many works that came before it: to demonstrate the universal utility of the case studies from this region to archaeological and anthropological understandings of intercultural interaction among diverse populations along fluid, ever-changing frontiers and borders.

*Introduction*

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**FIGURE 1.1.** *Map of Southeastern Mesoamerica with key sites mentioned in this volume (see table 1.1). Our omission of a physical boundary to delineate the region is deliberate and in keeping with the spirit of this volume.*

**TABLE 1.1.** Key sites mentioned in the text and included in figure 1.1

<i>Site No.</i>	<i>Site</i>	<i>Site No.</i>	<i>Site</i>	<i>Site No.</i>	<i>Site</i>
1	Jocotán	11	Sinsimbla	21	Silca
2	Jupilingo	12	Tencoa	22	Santa Rosalia
3	Copán	13	San Fernando de Omoa	23	La Cañera
4	Cuscatlan	14	Ticamaya	24	Calpules
5	Río Amarillo	15	Travesia	25	El Zapotillo
6	San Marcos	16	Salitrón Viejo	26	Rancho Rosa
7	La Union	17	Comayagua	27	La Cooperativa
8	Yamala	18	Lejamani	28	Suyapita
9	La Pintada	19	El Antigual		
10	El Gigante	20	Augusta		

This volume's editors and contributors represent a range of senior and junior scholars in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and ethnohistory, with decades of combined research in Southeastern Mesoamerica. The chapters in this volume are representative of the most recent theoretically driven and socially relevant research on the past indigenous peoples of this region and encompass the entire temporal depth of past human occupation in this area—from the latest Pleistocene to the ethnohistoric and historic periods—as well as the vast spatial and cultural breadth that is encompassed within the area. The majority of these contributions are the culmination of multiyear projects, which have continued to expand our understanding of the cultural diversity present in the geographic area that lies between Mesoamerica and the Intermediate Area.

### SOUTHEASTERN MESOAMERICA AS AN OBJECT OF STUDY

Just as the concept of Southeastern Mesoamerica has changed, the southern “border” of Mesoamerica was at various times placed along the Ulúa and Lempa Rivers of western Honduras and El Salvador (Fox 1981; Lange and Stone 1984), the Choluteca River in southern Honduras (Glass 1966), and the Nicoya Peninsula in northwestern Costa Rica (Fowler 1991; Lange 1979). This same geographic area also received interchangeable titles including *Middle America*, *Central America*, and *Lower Central America* by various scholars over the years. One additional factor that has significantly contributed to the diffuse definition of this area is its ecological, geophysical, and cultural heterogeneity (Willey 1984). However, this diversity is one of Southeastern Mesoamerica's most defining characteristics. The spatial proximity of varied landforms and ecosystems, each with its own suite of resources, led to the early development of localized traditions that were both isolated and at the same time intricately linked in various ways with those of groups near and far. The history of how these groups and their interactions have been studied is long and complex, and beyond the purview of this introduction, and we present but a brief summary of it below in an effort to situate our volume within it.

This region originally encompassed the southernmost limit of the Mesoamerican culture area, a concept developed by Paul Kirchhoff (1943, 1952, 1960) and operationalized by Willey et al. (1964) to delimit a geographic area of shared languages and cultural traits. As its name suggests, this region was originally thought of as the cultural periphery or fringe of the larger and more economically and sociopolitically centralized societies in Mesoamerica. It was for a long time referred to as the *Southeastern Maya Periphery* (Lothrop

1939), since it was believed that the Maya represented the evolutionary endpoint towards which other smaller and less complex societies aspired to or were headed towards. Consequently, and following the culture area approach espoused by Kroeber (1939), groups in this area were defined almost exclusively by the presence or absence of cultural traits characteristic of more complex societies (Baudez 1970; Hay et al. 1940; Sauer 1959; Spinden 1924).

While some early research acknowledged that populations in Southeastern Mesoamerica were not solely reliant on external influences for their social and cultural development (Strong 1935; Stone 1957), the periphery was nevertheless often viewed as being in the shadow of Maya politics and their histories (i.e., Baudez 1970:133). Because this region was analyzed for so long in comparison with or as a reflection of its Maya neighbors, studies of interaction and diffusion were predominant, and these focused primarily on stylistic, ideational, and sociopolitical influences and similarities (Hay et al. 1940; Kroeber 1939; Longyear 1947; Lothrop 1939; Thompson 1970). The goal of these studies was to identify where certain traits were present or absent, with the ultimate aim of defining the area of influence of particular cultures. As such, Southeastern Mesoamerica was often seen as a transitional or buffer zone, where Mesoamerican traditions “thinned out” and traces of Lower Central American or Intermediate Area traditions began to appear (Baudez 1970; Lange 1979). Despite the shortcomings of this approach, and as pointed out by others in the past (Schortman and Urban 1986), this research was the product of early twentieth-century archaeology, which focused largely on state-level societies such as the Maya and was thus part of a common historical narrative in our field.

This trend shifted markedly in the 1970s and 1980s with the onset of large-scale projects across much of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, and a shift in focus towards examining the nuanced and mutualistic nature of the interaction between state- and nonstate-level societies and local sociopolitical developments (e.g., Andrews 1976; Boone and Willey 1988; Creamer 1987; Creamer and Haas 1985; Demarest 1988; Healy 1984; Helms and Loveland 1976; Hirth et al. 1989; Lange 1984, 1992; Lange and Stone 1984; Linares 1979; Robinson 1987; Schortman and Ashmore 2012; Schortman et al. 1986; Sharer 1974, 1978, 1984; Sheets 1979, 1982; Urban and Schortman 1986, 1988). This research questioned the marginal status of the region and exploited its potential for providing detailed understandings of the relationships between states and nonstates and highlighted the relevance that these insights could have in similar areas around the globe. In Honduras, the Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History (IHAH) began to organize symposia that

allowed researchers to share results and interpretations from projects taking place across the country. This work was expanded upon in subsequent seminars, meetings, and symposia in the United States, leading to the publication of a number of edited volumes (e.g., Boone and Willey 1988; Fowler 1991; Graham 1993; Helms and Loveland 1976; Henderson and Beaudry-Corbett 1993; Robinson 1987).

During this time, some authors (e.g., Schortman and Urban 1986) proposed the usage of the term *periphery* rather than *frontier*, as it signified a more porous boundary that more adequately explained the multidirectional nature of the interactions taking place between Southeast Mesoamerican populations and those to the north and south. Other scholars (e.g., Fox 1981) redefined the concept of frontier to mean not a boundary but a distinct cultural entity with its own internal history and traits that combine Mesoamerican and non-Mesoamerican elements. Frederick Lange (1976, 1979), on the other hand, advocated the use of the term *buffer*, which implies a zone composed of at least two frontiers or boundaries with more developed cultures and an area of internal developments. This concept emphasized the “outstanding feature” of this area: the maintenance of long-term indigenous traditions in spite of constant interaction with outside forces (Lange 1976).

Researchers in the 1980s also advocated a variety of models and approaches to the study of the prehispanic peoples of Southeastern Mesoamerica. The interaction sphere or network model (Joyce 1988; Smith and Heath-Smith 1980; Urban and Schortman 1988) was developed to allow for the examination of the relationships between societies with different sociopolitical configurations without requiring the delimitation of rigid geographic boundaries. Researchers applied this model to bring attention to the diverse strategies used by local populations to tap into various inter- and intraregional networks at different points in time for a variety of purposes. A third model expanded upon the interaction-sphere approach and focused on acculturation and the changes produced by the different kinds of relationships taking place between neighboring groups (Ashmore et al. 1982; Urban and Schortman 1986). This acculturation model viewed geographical boundaries as dynamic and did not limit itself to a single dimension of interaction (e.g., economic, political, social), which allowed for the integration of large amounts of data.

Research in the 1990s continued adding to our understanding of the region and addressed the limitations of ongoing research, namely the homogenization of cultures and a unidirectional view of intersocietal interactions that assumed the domination of state-level societies (Graham 1993; Lange 1993, 1996; Schortman and Nakamura 1991; Schortman and Urban 1994, 1996;



Sharer 1992; Sheets 1992). This research showed how the peoples of Southeast Mesoamerica—and aspiring individuals within these societies—constantly shifted and manipulated their identities to project their independence from their neighbors to the north, in some instances playing politics against each other to gain access to particular resources or networks of exchange. This work also began simultaneously to parse out the political, economic, and ideological dimensions of interaction between state- and nonstate-level societies and to show how these did not always overlap (Schortman and Urban 1994, 1996). In the 1990s archaeologists working in Southeastern Mesoamerica adopted world-systems theory, originally developed by Wallerstein (1976, 1980), to better examine the nuanced and multidirectional ways in which cores—large hierarchical societies, namely Maya polities—interacted with their hinterlands or peripheries (Joyce 1996; Schortman and Urban 1994, 1999). This research showed that Maya polities had in many cases strong and long-lasting connections with polities and societies in the region; however, these larger polities never established long-term economic, political, or ideological dominance over other polities in the region, did not have direct or indirect control over these, and were thus forced to interact with these societies in a wide variety of forms (Joyce 1996; Schortman and Urban 1999).

Archaeologists in this decade also dropped the term *periphery* and adopted the more neutral term *Southeastern Mesoamerica* to address this area without focusing on a particular chronological period (usually the Late Classic), to move away from an emphasis on interregional interaction, and to emphasize the dualistic nature of interactions between this and neighboring regions (Fowler 1991; Schortman and Urban 1994). Moreover, research began to focus on the internal trajectories and dynamics of Southeastern Mesoamerican societies, including the emic factors and processes that led to the development and relative stability of the sociopolitical complexity and economic independence of these groups (Joyce 1993; Lange 1992, 1993, 1996; Sheets 1992). It was also at this time that researchers once again began to “look south” and examine the relationships between groups in this region with groups in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia (e.g., Healy 1992; Healy et al. 1996; Joyce 1993; Lange 1992, 1993). The book *Los indios de Centroamérica* by Hasemann and colleagues (1996) marked the apogee of research at this time and synthesized the current state of knowledge of past and present indigenous societies through the lenses of archaeology, ethnohistory, and cultural anthropology. These authors called on future researchers to keep the far-reaching history of indigenous populations in mind when studying the mosaic of cultures that have characterized this region.

Research at the turn of the twenty-first century continued to expand in depth and breadth across Southeastern Mesoamerica. The IHAH once again hosted research symposia in the late 1990s and early 2000s, resulting in two edited volumes (Fajardo and Ávalos 2004; Martínez 2012) and an electronic conference proceedings (Fajardo and Figueroa 2004). Sessions organized at international meetings also brought together scholars working in the region to share their latest results, though these did not result in edited volumes but rather individual articles and monographs, too numerous to cite here. Research in the past two decades expanded our knowledge of periods outside the Classic, namely the Preclassic and colonial periods, which had up to then remained largely unexplored. These efforts also sought to address explicitly the relevance of archaeological research to contemporary issues of identity, sustainability, and cultural-heritage management (Martínez 2012).

The research presented in this volume continues to highlight the diversity and dynamism of the indigenous groups that inhabited and continue to inhabit its borders. Alongside continuity in cultural, linguistic, social, and political processes, sweeping changes that have shaped the broad history of the region are also identified. This research echoes what previous studies in the region have argued for decades: that cultures living in Southeastern Mesoamerica were not marginal at all, but rather defined their own goals and lives according to their own premises and principles, while selectively and strategically borrowing from cultural traditions to the north and south. These peoples had their own forms of monumental architecture, long-term human-environment relations, and routes and methods of exchange, but also social, cultural, political, and economic traits that were wholly their own, and the result of internal creativity and inspiration influenced by local social and natural trajectories.

## NEW APPROACHES TO SOUTHEASTERN MESOAMERICA

Collectively, the chapters in this volume call upon scholars working in Mesoamerica, the Intermediate Area, and other cultural border areas around the world to reexamine the roles that indigenous resilience and agency play in the so-called margins or peripheries of better known cultures and the cultural developments and interactions that occur within them. At the local level, these chapters continue to move beyond defining this region and its history not by what it lacks or with respect to its better-known cultural neighbors to the north and south, but rather by its local histories and developments.

The contributions included in this volume present data and interpretations that are necessary to expand the discussion of what social complexity entails,

particularly in a region neighboring a large cultural group that personifies the traditional definition of a complex society, the Maya. The various contributors to this volume, despite their call for a new framework of analysis, acknowledge the difficulty of abandoning old terminologies because of their history of use and because they serve as points of reference to entities and processes that are better understood, which is why the term *Southeast Mesoamerica* is retained. This limitation, however, is a challenge for future researchers of the region, who should seek to fill the gaps in our knowledge of the prehistory and history of the area in order to better understand it. It is our hope that the research presented in this volume will inspire others to establish new frameworks for describing the phenomena we are observing in Southeastern Mesoamerica; not simply new definitions of old terms, but a new language that will allow researchers in this area to describe the realities we are witnessing and struggling to define using previous approaches and their related conceptual baggage. This process of change is gradual and difficult, and at this stage we cannot change our conceptual framework without changing our interpretations, and vice versa. As a result, some of the chapters in this volume focus on new ways to collect data, others on new ways to interpret it, and still others on new ways to discuss both data and our interpretations of it. Together, they move us forward, increasing the lexicon with which we describe and discuss archaeological phenomena.

Like the edited volumes that preceded and inspired it (e.g., Boone and Willey 1988; Fajardo and Ávalos 2004; Fowler 1991; Graham 1993; Henderson and Beaudry-Corbett 1993; Lange 1992; Lange and Stone 1984; Robinson 1987; Urban and Schortman 1986), this compilation aims to provide archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and ethnohistorians working in Mesoamerica, the Intermediate Area, and beyond with new theoretical perspectives and unique case studies on how indigenous groups in these areas mitigated, negotiated, and sidestepped natural, cultural, economic, and sociopolitical changes within and outside their borders during the prehistoric and historic periods. We are at a point in time when we have the critical mass of data necessary to make a systematic comparison of the actions and reactions of the groups along Southeastern Mesoamerica in relation to each other, rather than solely with distant groups, which will lead to a better understanding of the history of the region in its own right. As the history of research in the area shows well, this is a joint effort, and can only be accomplished through working alongside living communities (the subject of a separate recent edited volume: see Martínez 2012) and Central American students and scholars. As such, the chapters in this volume serve as a bridge from the pioneering research that has transformed our understanding of Southeastern Mesoamerica to research that

is forthcoming, shaped by local capacities and international collaboration. By combining Central American and foreign voices and experiences, this book places itself at a key juncture in the way archaeology and anthropology are conducted in Southeastern Mesoamerica and Central America in general.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE VOLUME

The volume is organized into fourteen chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. The main body of the book is organized both chronologically and spatially: the chapters transition from the deep to the recent past and move roughly from west to east and back as the volume moves through time. Generally, the first half of the volume deals with projects that rely strictly on archaeological evidence while those in the second half either incorporate or focus solely on historic documents. The chapter by Joyce is an exception to these generalizations, for reasons expanded upon below.

The volume begins with an overview in chapter 2 of the Preceramic period of Southeastern Mesoamerica (ca. 11,000–5,000 cal BP). Using data gathered over 16 years of pedestrian surveys in the highlands of southwestern Honduras, Alejandro Figueroa and Timothy Scheffler highlight how behavioral and environmental changes and developments taking place during this period helped bring about the region's well-known cultural markers, such as domestication, agriculture, and locally distinctive social relationships. This chapter provides a unique contribution by pushing the scope of time coverage in the volume into the deep past. Focusing on the Preceramic/Formative transition in southwestern Honduras, and particularly on data from the well-preserved remains of the El Gigante rockshelter, Figueroa and Scheffler outline the interplay between the natural and social landscapes of the area and how these factors led to the relatively late adoption of Mesoamerican cultivars. The patterns of domestication here were apparently heavily dependent on the natural landscape, which provided a relatively marginal environment for farming. Instead of intensive farming, experimentation with agroforestry occurred early and persisted late in this area, as evidenced by the changing morphometric qualities of avocado remains from the macrobotanical assemblage at El Gigante. Rather than suggesting the region was isolated, however, Figueroa and Scheffler show that the eventual adoption of Mesoamerican cultivars took place alongside continued use of a wide variety of locally available resources, suggesting that the shift was voluntary rather than necessary for survival, highlighting local ties to wider social networks throughout Southeastern Mesoamerica. In turn, the limits of the landscape may have

helped shape the social and political processes of early Lenca groups in the area, given that only limited and likely unreliable surpluses of crops could be amassed. The authors suggest that this lack of predictable resources was one of several needs that fostered early ties between groups.

Throughout their chapter, Figueroa and Scheffler return to the cultural significance of caves and rockshelters over time as well, arguing that the uses of caves and rockshelters in this area suggest deep roots for common Mesoamerican ritual practices, ranging from practical needs for shelter for early populations to ossuaries of the Classic period and locations for wakes in the present day. The association between caves and the dead was surely shaped throughout the period in which locals made these locations their home. The ritual and symbolic importance of caves and rockshelters is underscored by the presence of rich displays of art at these locales. The admittedly tenuous links between the motifs present in the rock art and the ethnohistorically recorded practices of local groups is an avenue for future research here. Overall, this chapter sets the model followed by several other chapters in the book by laying out the connectedness of Southeastern Mesoamerican groups, apparent even this far into the past, and demonstrating the persistence of traditions over many millennia.

Chapter 3 by Erlend Johnson moves the focus of the volume into western Honduras and later in time. His work adds to our understanding of the reach and influence of the Copán polity along the Southeastern Mesoamerican border. By tracing the political development of settlements in the Cucuyagua and Sensenti Valleys from the Protoclassic to the Late Classic periods, he outlines divergent histories in the types of relationships enjoyed and the strategies employed by local residents in their dealings with the Copán elite. In line with other research at sites along the edge of the Copán polity, Johnson suggests that Copán's influence in the political processes that unfolded in the neighboring valleys was filtered not only by distance but by the particular response of the existing populations in those areas and possibly by the nature of the existing settlements. With data from extensive survey and mapping of both the Cucuyagua and Sensenti Valleys, Johnson uses settlement patterns and monumental architecture as proxies for political organization and collective action to trace the political trajectories of each area. Ceramic and architectural data from excavations are used to bolster local chronologies from these little-known areas and to assess the nature of the relationship between distant settlements and the Copán elite. While settlements in the further afield Sensenti Valley were precocious during the Protohistoric period, interaction with Copán seems to have been relatively limited in comparison with the central

site of La Union in the Cucuyagua Valley during the Late Classic period. Although influence from Copán is evident at later settlements in the Sensenti Valley, evidence from La Union demonstrates what was likely a more direct, mutually beneficial relationship between local elites and those at Copán that resulted in a more definitively hierarchical political organization in the traditional lowland Maya style and suggests direct political integration within the broader Copán polity in the Late Classic period. In addition to calling attention to the diverse range of political strategies and resulting organizations that existed along the border, this study adds evidence of long-lived settlements in both valleys, highlighting the cultural continuity of many of the groups in the region. Johnson's work echoes the sentiment of decades of research along Southeastern Mesoamerica and reminds us that while few settlements in this region were untouched by the founding of the Copán polity and its expansion during the Late Classic period, local responses to shifting political structures are not predictable and cannot be assumed.

In chapter 4, Cameron McNeil and colleagues move us even closer to the polity of Copán by presenting their recent findings from excavations at the site of Río Amarillo, located within the Copán Valley. Drawing on what is known of the complex history of the ruling dynasty of Copán, they expertly weave the fate of rulers and the extent of their political reach with the history of this particular site, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the two. The authors then turn to the possible role and attraction of Río Amarillo—that of breadbasket to feed the populations of Copán as the center grew during the Late Classic period. In addition to its strategic location for trade, the authors argue that its proximity to fertile lands did indeed contribute to its importance and likely explains the continued interest and investment in the settlement by the Copán elite. Furthermore, they note that the location of Río Amarillo near diverse ecological zones likely played a sustaining role in this relationship. The authors provide an in-depth history of the site from the limited Preclassic settlement, through its most-intensive occupation during the Late Classic, and into the Terminal Classic and Postclassic periods. Using architectural and artifactual data, they outline the long-term interaction between the Copán elites and residents at Río Amarillo as well as highlighting the often-overlooked interactions between the site and their central Honduran neighbors. This is an important contribution in that it extends the examination of settlement histories both spatially and temporally within the Copán Valley, as they are often limited to the site core itself, and also draws on a familiarity of the researchers with the cultural practices of other areas of Honduras to demonstrate the significant ties to those regions that may not have been

considered otherwise. This perfectly demonstrates the need for researchers to possess broad familiarity with both Southeastern Mesoamerican cultural histories and an understanding of the populations that lived beyond this imaginary border.

William McFarlane and Miranda Stockett Suri's chapter 5 explicitly argues for, and convincingly demonstrates, the potential of Southeastern Mesoamerican datasets to address broader questions about the nature of political, social, and economic responses to interaction on a politically diverse landscape. Drawing on data from valley-wide survey and excavations at the Late Classic site of Sinsimbla, the authors consider intra- and intervalley patterns in settlement, architecture, and artifacts across the Jesús de Otoro Valley in relation to patterns seen in neighboring valleys. At this scale, differences in seemingly homogenous ceramic traditions can tease out diverse but overlapping networks of interaction among this and neighboring valleys. Consistent site planning at contemporaneous settlements within a limited portion of the valley, when considered in conjunction with the settlement-pattern data demonstrating the lack of primary centers, suggests heterarchical organization. How and why this organization came to be will require further investigation within the valley. In any case, documenting the way in which the populations of the Jesús de Otoro valley organized themselves during the Late Classic period adds an essential piece to the puzzle that is Southeastern Mesoamerica—a piece that could only now take shape, given that interpretations relied heavily on the availability of increasingly robust datasets from nearby regions. As the authors note, this scale of interpretation, in between the restrictive intravalley confines of a single project's data, and one step below a broad regional interpretation, is precisely the type of foundational research that is necessary to piece together a solid understanding of diversity and continuity in central Honduras and beyond. Only by comparing the actions and reactions of the groups along Southeastern Mesoamerica in a systematic way will we be able to discover the broader truths about the history of Southeastern Mesoamerica as a whole.

In chapter 6, Eva Martínez, working in the previously unstudied Jamastrán Valley of southeastern Honduras, uses survey data to model demographic patterns to gain an understanding of the multiscale social and political organization of its prehispanic inhabitants during its brief history of occupation from AD 600 to 1000. Martínez mapped ceramic-sherd distributions across the entire valley and transformed these data into densities that reflect socially meaningful units and imply certain levels of interaction among residents that may correspond with certain categories of settlement like households,



farmsteads, hamlets, or villages. Like others, she finds that settlement patterns within the valley do not support the presence of hierarchically organized populations. Instead, over 60 percent of the valley's inhabitants were shown to have been clustered into two relatively equally populated settlement areas that contained the majority of cross-community interactions within their respective boundaries, suggesting two autonomous social and/or political systems operating within the valley. The author argues that prestige-oriented economic strategies, focused on controlled access to prime agricultural lands, local craft production and exchange, or interregional exchange, were either not employed or not entirely successful in the valley. Despite not being directly involved in strategies of hierarchical power, however, local populations were significantly connected to social and political networks centered farther west, which resulted in local decentralization in conjunction with similar processes occurring throughout much of Southeastern Mesoamerica.

In chapter 7, Christopher Begley discusses the ways in which prominent members of eastern Honduran populations utilized certain symbolic elements from neighboring areas, especially site planning from Mesoamerica, to materialize their claim to power, while otherwise maintaining minimal interactions with neighboring cultures. Begley's work, much like that of Martínez, demonstrates the difficulty in drawing a singular or certain border for Southeastern Mesoamerica. Building on a long but often overlooked history of research in the Mosquitia, Begley traces the development of complexity among groups settled in interior valleys from AD 500 to 1000 through extensive archaeological survey and excavation. While local groups share cultural traits and ties with groups in Lower Central America to the south, Begley argues that emerging elites used their ties to Mesoamerican groups not to exploit commodity-based trade networks but rather to tap into networks of power that relied on restricted access to esoteric knowledge. Most important, however, were the ways in which that knowledge was used to shape internal political and social relations. The creation and maintenance of internal inequalities relied on the ability of elites to transform their knowledge into concrete, material means of power that could be understood and experienced by many but controlled by few. Begley sees these relationships manifested in the unexpected construction of ballcourts at multiple sites within the region at a time in which the first traces of complexity also emerged. Ballcourts, he argues, in addition to being symbolically related to distant powers, were a well-defined arena for political competition that served as a stage for local aggrandizers. Additionally, despite its distance from the Maya frontier, this region underwent similar shifts in population and decentralization as seen



in the rest of Southeastern Mesoamerica, supporting the idea that ties to the north were significant in maintaining these local political structures. Begley's work shares central underlying tenets with many other researchers working along this border: that the nature and importance of broad, external influences can truly be understood only by looking at local processes.

Chapters 8–12 discuss the challenges and possibilities inherent in studying indigenous populations through ethnohistoric documents and archaeological excavations, and the intersection between these complementary datasets. These chapters highlight how the combination of ethnohistoric documents and archaeological investigations can lead to a better understanding of the continuity of communities of practice and the ethnogenesis of hybrid identities and communities resulting from indigenous and African groups that were displaced and forced to adapt and coexist.

The first of these chapters, chapter 8, by Lorena Mihok and colleagues, bridges the artificial divide between prehispanic and colonial archaeology in the region. The authors examine the overlapping histories of the indigenous Pech, the Miskitu—whose identity cannot be succinctly defined or delineated in time or space—and the European colonizers of the Bay Islands and the north coast of Honduras. Mirroring the present-day situation, this area has long been a crossroads where many groups came into contact. Beginning with Columbus's arrival in 1502, the Bay Islands in particular were a contested locale, battled over by English and Spanish forces over the following centuries. The authors argue that differences in the royalization strategies employed by European colonizers played a role in shaping different long-term demographic processes of these two local groups. The Spanish, looking to discourage settlement on the Bay Islands, forcibly resettled the majority of Pech populations to the mainland. The English, however, opted to encourage the adoption of a distinctly Miskitu identity that relied heavily on both symbolic and material elements borrowed from English society in order to solidify alliances with that group. Using archaeological data from the island of Roatán, the authors examine Postclassic-period Pech sites and an eighteenth-century Miskitu-English settlement as case studies for how these broad strategies played out locally and were shaped by existing social, political, and environmental circumstances. Notably, they also draw connections between their research and ongoing debates about Bay Islander identities today, highlighting the central role of knowledge from history and prehistory in modern issues of group identity and heritage preservation.

In chapter 9, Russell Sheptak also seeks to mend the divide between prehispanic and historic archaeology, but also speaks explicitly to the importance of

doing so and the inherent difficulties involved, both theoretically and methodologically. Sheptak begins by laying out the central challenges to this work: establishing chronologies, understanding site-formation processes, and using appropriate units and scales of analysis. Rather than simply laying out these problems, however, Sheptak offers solutions that range from practical methodological goals to improved frameworks for bringing together data from excavation and historical documents that take as central the consideration of the movement of people and things across landscapes. Using case studies from contemporaneous northern Honduran indigenous and European colonial settlements, Sheptak demonstrates the essential utility of his approach. Patterns in the production and use of materials recovered from excavation are compared within and among towns that are known from historical documents to have been connected by the movement of people and things. The creation of new identities—ethnogenesis—from new, mixed populations is recorded in the similarities in material assemblages across these sites, but only a landscape scale of analysis, guided in its investigation of connections by the documentary evidence, provides this insight. His perspective offers not just hope but proof that carefully executed research on Honduran colonial settlements can overcome past difficulties and produce fascinating new, otherwise unattainable, and strikingly rich understandings of this period that are not limited to European settlements.

Moving back towards the western portion of the country, chapter 10 by Gloria Lara-Pinto provides a rich history of the complex Lenca-Chortí-Nahua frontier in southwestern Honduras through an extensive analysis of historic texts from the region. This chapter poses questions about how and why the conquest played out in this area as it did, particularly by exploring the ways in which the existing social and political ties and histories among and within local groups influenced how events unfolded. Lara-Pinto begins by laying out the deep history of the Lenca in the area, relying primarily on linguistic and documentary analyses, and highlighting the long-contested nature of this region as a united territory. She then continues to outline the complex trajectory of the local processes of segmentation and integration among the Lenca prior to contact. These include intense internal politics, but also the use of ethnic ties in the maintenance of the Lenca's "floating frontier," wherein ethnically Lenca groups experiencing internal conflict would unite against outside threats. Eventually, this strategy helped the Lenca to preserve their ancestral territories, even in the face of the encroaching migrations of Chortí and eventually Nahua-Pipil populations into the region. This series of events in the precontact history of the Lenca clearly set a precedent for

strategies of resistance, which helped the Lenca maintain ancestral territories despite Spanish conquests into the region. Ultimately, Lara-Pinto's work serves to remind us that the social and political landscapes of the indigenous territories into which the Spanish marched were not static or simplistic. Nor were the events that unfolded reliant only on the history of outside forces, but rather were heavily influenced by the long-term histories of indigenous groups like the Lenca. The Spanish were not the first or the last challenge faced by the Lenca, and that reality had as much consequence and importance then as it does today.

In chapter 11, Pastor Gómez provides a new view on the political geography of the Lenca of western and southwestern Honduras. He argues that the use of the term *province* to describe the political configuration of the region has been assumed in previous ethnohistorical analyses to imply political unity. In the Lenca area, this has led to an assumption that vast territories were united under a single ruler. Gómez contends that the nature of the political structure among the Lenca prior to and immediately following contact is understood to have been composed of an elite class of chiefs and priests, but that the extent of such politically integrated units was small and centralization of power was weak. Using examples from newly discovered sixteenth-century texts, he demonstrates ambiguities in the use of the word *province*, which can range in meaning from an area united by politics to one united by language, ethnicity, or even one in which settlements are simply geographically proximate. He then discusses specific examples from the Lenca area that support his claim that previously outlined provinces are not actually representative of integrated units, at least not politically. More than semantics, Gómez's argument is that a monolithic interpretation of the word *province* in historical documents has limited the ways in which we consider Lenca political organization and overshadowed complexities in the arrangement and interaction of their settlements. This conclusion has far-reaching implications for the use of historic texts in understanding social and political integration across the region and serves as a cautionary tale for other ethnohistorians.

William Fowler examines similar political relationships from a broader perspective in chapter 12, using ethnohistoric documents as a way to infer the region's far-reaching prehistoric networks of exchange and interaction. Fowler draws attention to the considerable amount of data that can be gleaned concerning prehispanic networks of communication, interaction, and migration through a thorough analysis of early historical accounts. By studying the movements of early Spanish conquistadors and their native allies in El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, he argues that we may develop better

understandings of the level and manner of interconnectedness across these regions. While Spaniards and their particular motivations were ultimately driving the movement of troops across the landscape, the logistics of those movements were likely heavily reliant on indigenous allies familiar with existing routes that may have been in use for thousands of years prior to contact. Using three case studies, he presents evidence for specific routes that likely represented longstanding networks of interaction that were appropriated by the Spaniards in their military conquests across Southeastern Mesoamerica. Additionally, Fowler suggests that current models of prehispanic troop movements are likely underestimating the ability of native armies to move large numbers of people great distances in relatively short amounts of time. Using examples from the early colonial period, he demonstrates the occurrence of such large-scale troop movements that involved large numbers of native allies. While Fowler cautions that such routes and movements should not be assumed to be directly analogous to indigenous migrations and interactions, his model highlights the central role and agency of native allies in choices made about Spanish military operations. In doing so, he has laid out several avenues of inquiry into networks for prehispanic interaction that can be borne out by future archaeological investigations.

The final two chapters of the book are dedicated to addressing the state and future of research in Southeastern Mesoamerica. In chapter 13, Rosemary Joyce calls for the adoption of a new framework for analyzing indigenous societies in the area, particularly in Honduras. Joyce argues that the archaeological record of Honduras provides a rare opportunity to document forms of social organization that restrained inequality, yet traditional frameworks are hindering our understandings and interpretations. By adopting a social framework based on tracing *communities of practice*, we can begin to detect and describe the repeated, shared practices that brought groups together at varied and often overlapping scales across space and time. This allows us to look at differences from the household to the settlement to the region in ways that are complementary, not conflicting, in order to explain complicated realities where communities of practice cross-cut the types of groups defined by characteristics such as ethnicity or language that we typically rely on. Drawing on data synthesized from over 30 years of fieldwork in western Honduras, Joyce first traces the communities of practice involved in the production and consumption of Ulúa Polychrome and Ulúa marble vessels. She uses these examples to demonstrate how patronage of craft skills and spirituality were both integrating forces among communities who participated in events that necessitated the use of these items, but that they were also used in multiple

ways by multiple actors so that the same item or type of item may have been part of several communities of practice. By recognizing that communities of practice may share deep-rooted similarities across space and time, comprising a constellation of practice, this framework also allows flexibility in describing and explaining the arrangement of and interaction between actors at varying scales. This is essential, Joyce argues, in a region characterized by heterogeneous settlements that reflect the simultaneous operation of multiple forms of organization. Additionally, and significantly, it was precisely this heterogeneity that allowed for the constraining of inequality that is so unique to the region. To illustrate this point, Joyce contrasts processes of inequality development at Copán with those at Cerro Palenque and Travesia in northwestern Honduras. While inequality existed at the latter two sites, relative inequality—that is, the degree of difference between classes—was less. Heterogeneity—that is, the distribution of populations between social groups—indicates that the structure of power was heterarchical: instead of expanding the hierarchy by creating new levels within a single power structure, new hierarchies of power were created. Ultimately, it was the differentiation of power, and the independence of those domains, that restrained inequality across the region and led to greater stability among Honduran societies than their Maya neighbors during the Late/Terminal Classic.

The volume concludes with chapter 14, written by Edward Schortman and Patricia Urban, who were among the first to examine Southeastern Mesoamerica under a new light in a series of articles and an edited volume (Schortman and Urban 1994; Schortman et al. 1986; Urban and Schortman 1986). Their work has inspired and challenged many others working in the region. In this concluding synthesis, Schortman and Urban summarize the common goals and themes of the other chapters in the volume, pointing to collective advances in methods and theory as well as enduring problems in Southeastern Mesoamerican research. They argue that many of the lingering issues facing the region are a result of how early work drew the southeast border and led to assumptions that not much was to be learned from the small-scale societies located beyond it, resulting in the lag in research in comparison to the Maya region that is still apparent today. Relatedly, groups beyond the border, as well as the scholars who study them, are still often defined only relative to the Maya. In defining groups in their own right, they argue, contributors to the volume are helping to shed light on the varied social and political forms and strategies that existed in the region at various levels and were enacted by different players, resulting in the material patterns we find today. This ties into Schortman and Urban's broader point that our units of analysis are crucial to

shaping how we conceptualize these interactions and the material patterns they produce. While previous work in the region has tended to privilege the importance of hierarchically structured relations, contributions to this volume emphasize the importance and prevalence of heterarchically organized political and social interactions. This encourages multiscalar perspectives that are better able to detect and describe networks and identities that cross-cut traditionally understood groups and boundaries. To accompany these new understandings, and to be able to trace and discuss them effectively, new terms and definitions are required to be able to capture the unfolding complexity of the past as it is revealed through new investigations. While these steps are difficult, Schortman and Urban contend that they are necessary for moving research forward and making it more achievable through the collection and sharing of comparable data across the region. As we work towards this goal, scholars in the region are collectively contributing to understanding broad questions concerning Southeastern Mesoamerica—ones that have evolved from simplistic notions of who was and was not Maya, to anthropologically significant concerns with how small-scale societies act and react to large and expansive states in ways that shaped their local trajectories in meaningful ways, particularly where they were able to avoid the development of local political centralization and hierarchies. Schortman and Urban's chapter makes clear that while our understanding of the region has changed in significant ways, the central tenet of the work here has remained the same: Southeastern Mesoamerica has lessons to teach us about the nature of frontier and border interactions that are relevant beyond the region.

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