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1

Introducing Ritual Economy

Understanding the organization and development of intermediate-level societies known as chiefdoms is one of the most fascinating and challenging areas of archaeological research. Chiefdoms¹ are important in developmental terms because they represent a level of organization beyond the kin-based village. They were regional socio-political entities with leaders who were able to coordinate and integrate populations of thousands to tens of thousands of individuals (Earle 2021:1; Kirch 1989). Chiefdom societies across Central America are fascinating because of the diversity of sumptuous goods they procured, produced, and used in different ways to reinforce social positions and belief systems.² But they are challenging because of the diversity of their population size, the different ways they were organized, and the way they cycled through episodes of growth and decline. A good deal of the variability in chiefdoms reflects the different organizational pathways they followed in shaping forms of regional integration. Recent research has identified three intertwined sources of power leaders used to shape these polities: religious ideology, warrior might, and control of individual and social wealth (Earle 1991).

Much of what is known about the organization of chiefdom societies has come from excellent ethnographic and ethnohistoric studies conducted over several centuries of European and American colonial expansion. Nevertheless, a comparative study of chiefdoms in the Americas concluded that these two

traditional sources will not by themselves further our understanding of their development. What is needed are long-term studies of single societies using archaeological information from which processes of cultural development can be identified (Drennan and Uribe 1987:viii–ix).

This study examines the long-term development of a single, small chiefdom society in the El Cajón region of west-central Honduras (figure 1.1). West-central Honduras covers the five Honduran departments of Atlántida, Yoro, Cortés, Comayagua, and Santa Bárbara. It covers the roughly triangular area from the mouth of the Ulúa River south into the Comayagua valley and the site of Yarumela, then northwest through the sites of Gualjoquito and El Coyote to the Guatemala border (see figure 2.1). Pre-Columbian societies throughout this region are characterized as chiefdoms because communities were small and regional integration appears to have been based on ritual practices. When conditions are evaluated for the development of complex societies in west-central Honduras, little evidence is found for inter-societal conflict. Archaeological sites are generally in undefended locales; lack palisades, terraces, or other defensive features; and show little evidence of warfare-related trauma in burial populations. Likewise, while there is evidence for some wealth inequality in the early stages of cultural development, the control of wealth goods was not an important source of elite power and appears to decrease over time.³ Ritual celebrations, feasting, and the power associated with them were the primary way regional networks were established and maintained in these societies.

Cultural development in the El Cajón region conforms to the expectations of a chiefdom society in several ways. The largest community in the El Cajón region was the site of Salitrón Viejo, with a population of 1,000–1,600 residents. Salitrón also was the center of ritual activity, which provided the means for building linkages with other communities throughout the region. Ritual-focused leadership involved the sponsorship of community feasts as part of public ceremonies and the mobilization of corvée labor for corporate work projects (e.g., Dietler and Hayden 2001; Dietler and Herbich 2001; Durrenberger 2008). The importance of community feasting has been documented for the historic Lenca of Honduras (Chapman 1985:87, 109–122; Herrera y Tordesillas 1944–1947:6:23; Lara-Pinto 1991b) and has been identified at numerous archaeological sites across southeastern Mesoamerica (Brown 2001; Hendon 2003; LeCount 2001; Wells 2007:38–51; Wells and Davis-Salazar 2008:200). An important feature of ritual activity in the El Cajón region was the construction of civic-ceremonial architecture at Salitrón Viejo and other

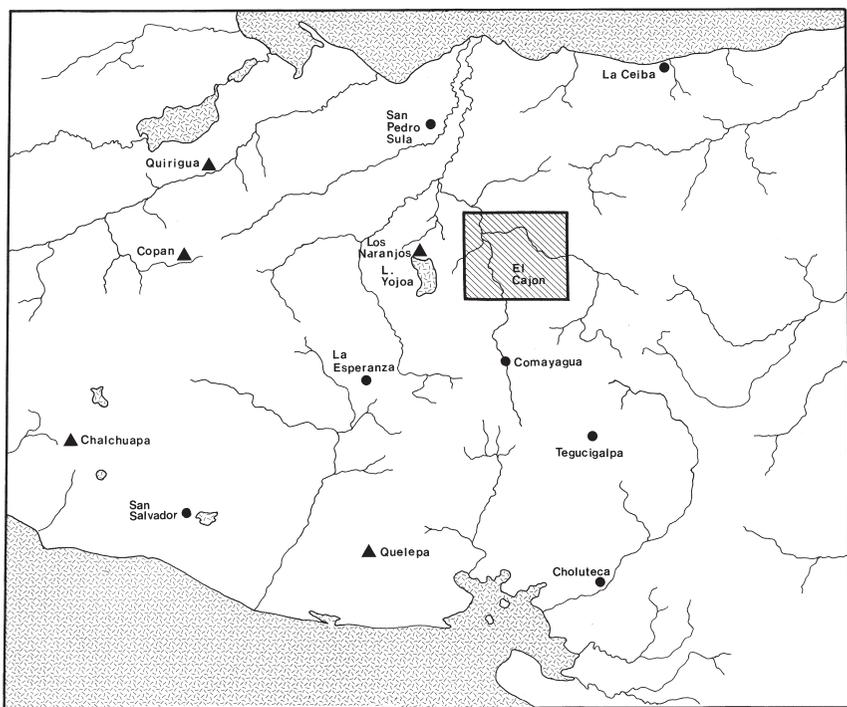


FIGURE 1.1. Location of the El Cajón region in Central America

sites along the Sulaco and Humuya Rivers. At Salitrón Viejo, large offerings of jade and other wealth goods were incorporated into civic-ceremonial constructions to sanctify their ritual use-life. The context and scale of these offerings also served to reinforce the social position of the leaders who supervised their ritual use.

This study explores the growth and decline of a regional chiefdom centered on the community of Salitrón Viejo over a 1,400-year period between 400 BC and AD 1000. It does so through the lens of ritual economy, which provides a means of assessing the importance and effectiveness of ritual celebrations as an integrative mechanism for the growth and maintenance of chiefdom societies. The goal of this volume is to present both the evidence for past ritual behavior and an analytic framework for interpreting it. The discussion that follows begins by exploring what is meant by the term *ritual economy* and how it can be applied to the study of small-scale pre-Columbian societies located across Honduras.

RITUAL AND ECONOMY IN PRE-COLUMBIAN SOCIETY

Archaeologists have had a long-standing interest in reconstructing both ritual and economic behavior in past societies (Friedman 1975). But as a rule, ritual and economy are topics examined separately by investigators using different types of data that are interpreted from distinct theoretical perspectives. Here they are discussed together using the perspective of ritual economy. Recent discussions have defined ritual economy as the process through which worldview and social ideology are materialized through the production, provisioning, and consumption of economic resources (Barber and Joyce 2007:237; McAnany and Wells 2008:1; Stanish 2017; Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007:2). Ritual from this perspective involves the communication of information through both verbal and non-verbal means (Rappaport 1971:26). It is not confined to religious messages but includes the broad range of behaviors that reinforce culturally meaningful ideologies that shape social, economic, and political behavior (Davis-Salazar 2007:198–202; Rappaport 1999:24; Wells 2006:278–279; Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007:4–5). This view of ritual is strongly economic in nature because it is through the production, transfer, and use of material goods in ritual contexts that social ideologies are established and reinforced.

Patricia McAnany (2010:3) has argued that economic practice is difficult to examine apart from the political, social, and cosmological frameworks in which it is practiced. From this perspective, economic activities in the pre-Columbian world were so entangled with socio-political interactions and individual identity that it is hard to determine what aspects of economic provisioning lie within the realm of ritual economy and which do not. Separating the task of provisioning from how pre-Columbian actors viewed the world in which they carried it out is a difficult task for archaeologists. Nevertheless, John Watanabe (2007) has proposed a partial solution. He argues that investigators can explore the topic of ritual economy from two distinct perspectives: as the *economics of ritual* and, less directly, as the *ritual of economy*. The “economics of ritual” perspective explores the costs of producing and carrying out ritual performances, with all the calculation, politicking, and profiting implied for those who organize and conduct them. It includes an evaluation of both the material goods and the types of behaviors involved in shaping and reinforcing social and political ideologies. The economics of ritual approach is more amenable to archaeological analysis, and that is the perspective adopted here. The “ritual of economy” perspective is different. It is concerned with identifying how mundane acts of provisioning and exchange are ritualized in cultural or symbolic ways that can run contrary to a strict neoclassical perspective

involving the allocation of scarce resources to alternative ends (Watanabe 2007:301). While also important to consider, it is more elusive to identify but needs to be recognized as an ever-present aspect of economic behavior. Given the distinctiveness of these two perspectives, it is useful to examine how ritual and economic practices work together in society as a first step in understanding how archaeological investigation can explore the ritual economy.

UNDERSTANDING RITUAL ECONOMY

The ritual economy helps develop a shared ideology among group participants as resources are produced and consumed collectively in culturally meaningful ways. Ritual behaviors reinforce a belief ideology, with social and sacred propositions that give it unquestionable validity (Rappaport 1971). Likewise, the demands of ritual economy create important provisioning needs that stimulate production for the feasts and offerings consumed in private and public events. Furthermore, it is in the context of public ceremony that rituals provide the framework for community and regional political integration while at the same time providing the individuals who lead them with opportunities to enhance their personal recognition and social authority. Each of these facets of ritual behavior is important to consider when the structure of ritual economy is examined in individual societies.

Ideologies are the shared beliefs and values that groups have in common. They are the structuring assumptions about how things operate that range from beliefs about the cosmos to the organization of the family, work, or entire socio-political systems. Shared ideologies build community and common identity (Durrenberger 2008:74; Goldschmidt 2006:40). They are an integral component of human interaction as well as the basis for individual power strategies. The information fundamental to shaping ideologies is conveyed, in part, through the material paraphernalia employed in ritual performances. It is the material and symbolic components of rituals that convey and transform ideas, values, stories, and myths into systems of collective belief and action. The use of material items in ritual celebrations provides some constancy to the messages communicated as well as linking past ritual outcomes to the present, at the same time that they provide continuity into the future. Because ideology is expressed through material media, ritual enactments normally involve the consumption of food, labor, and other resources. This creates a situation where leaders can control ritual performances and shape ideology as they direct the production, assembly, and use of the material goods employed within them. This provides a degree of ritual power within societies in the

same way individual control of wealth goods can become a power strategy within emergent complex societies (DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996:17; Hirth 1996b).

Ideology is an effective integrative device as long as individuals adhere to its principles and do not question its validity. Ideologies are commonly reinforced in two ways: by increasing the level of social buy-in within the participating groups or by making ideological principles inviolate by imbuing them with the sacred. Social buy-in involves the physical investment of time and resources in feasting celebrations, pilgrimages, and the construction of special facilities (e.g., plazas and ceremonial complexes) where rituals are conducted. Katherine Spielmann (2008:46) notes that civic-ceremonial buildings are especially important in this regard because their construction involves a public investment that leads to community cohesion and identity. Developing the sacred is another matter and involves linking ideologies to spiritual forces that cannot be questioned. Sacred propositions are neither verifiable nor falsifiable. According to Roy Rappaport (1971:36), imbuing social conventions with sanctity hides their arbitrary premises in a cloak of unquestionable necessity. Ritual is the vehicle that helps establish sacred propositions, especially when it creates a spiritual experience or altered consciousness brought on by group emotion, alcohol, or imbibing hallucinogenic substances.

All ritual in Mesoamerica was embedded in a pantheism worldview. In pantheism, the universe is the deity and everything in the world is imbued with its spirit (Maffie 2014:79; Sandstrom 2008:98). The earth was believed to be a living creature; human activities such as planting, hunting, and resource collection disturbed the balance of relationships within it. The imbalance produced by these activities was restored through rituals directed by specialists involving sacrifices made to the spirit world (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 1986:78, 2017:109). It is in this context that spectacular or unusual features of the landscape such as caves, springs, mountaintops, and cosmological features (i.e., sun, moon, stars) often became the conduits for special ritual offerings (Hasemann-Lara and Lara-Pinto 2014, 2019). Offerings in these contexts were often a response to repaying debts to the world of spirits.

The ritual economy consumes resources in feasting, mortuary or ceremonial offerings, and the labor to construct special facilities where rituals are conducted (Davis-Salazar 2007:197). These needs place demands on participating households to allocate labor to the production of resources that do not contribute to domestic support or household reproduction (Watanabe 2007:305). Eric Wolf (1966:10–11) placed these domestic obligations in what he called the household ceremonial fund, whether resources were extracted directly from

the coffers of household production or were produced outside the household in contexts dedicated to that purpose.⁴ The manufacture of items specifically for ritual use has been called the ritual mode of production⁵ and has been found in a wide range of societies, from tribal groups to archaic states (Berdan 2007; Hirth 2016:44–46; Rappaport 1968, 1979; Spielmann 2002:203, 2008:64–68). The demand for food used in feasts increased subsistence production in society, which could have served as a safeguard during periods of resource shortfall (Halstead 1989; Halstead and O’Shea 1989). Likewise, the need for socially valued goods for special offerings could have increased the level of craft production or fostered the long-distance acquisition of luxury goods (Wells and Davis-Salazar 2007:1). Levies of *corvée* labor for special work projects were part of the extra effort the ritual economy could have imposed on participating communities.

Feasts and other celebrations within and between communities do not occur spontaneously but require planning and organization. Ritual economy materializes meaning through economic action and provides an opportunity for increased social differentiation. The leader or sponsor of a celebration⁶ can use it as an avenue to enhance their personal status or to build social authority at the community or regional level. It is here that the ideology of the sacred can be used to create hierarchical differences and social categories that are beyond dispute and allow individual-centered positions of leadership to emerge (McAnany 2008:219). The creation of a regionally centralized authority created new demands on populations as more people were incorporated into larger social formations, whether they were individual-centered or organized through more collective means (Barber and Joyce 2007:230; Blanton et al. 1996; Carballo 2013). Christian Wells (2007:29) frames these demands within the concept of *ritual finance* where labor and resources were mobilized from supporting populations to validate the social, political, and cosmic order. Appealing to ritual needs makes the demands for labor or resources unquestionable (Foiás 2007:171–172). It also provides leaders of celebrations with the ability to control resource disposition and to use resources as an important source of personal power.

ADDRESSING THE ECONOMICS IN RITUAL ECONOMY

The topic of ritual economy cannot be addressed without clarifying what view of the economy is brought to the discussion. The economy is perceived of here as “a socially mediated form of material provisioning and interaction involving the production and allocation of resources among alternative

ends” (Hirth 2020:4). Ritual economy is examined from the perspective of behavioral economics, which does not accept all the tenets of neoclassical economics (Cartwright 2018; Thaler 2015, 2016). Instead, it considers the effects cultural, social, emotional, and cognitive factors have on the decisions individuals, groups, and institutions make with regard to economic provisioning. While it acknowledges that individuals and groups make economic choices, behavioral economics assumes that the criteria that govern those choices are learned and dictated by the social principles of the societies in which people live. Behavioral economics is not neoclassical economics in a new wrapper. Instead, it is a socially and ethnographically informed descriptive perspective on how people *actually* behave rather than assuming actions based on unemotional, perfectly rational principles of maximization.⁷

The field of behavioral economics is used to develop a framework for understanding ritual economy and to explore both the economics of conducting rituals and some of the cultural and emotional factors behind their operation. In broad terms, behavioral economics is the psychology of economic decision making. It recognizes the existence of altruism in human decision making and that individuals often make choices that benefit the group instead of maximizing self-interest. Behavioral economics views individuals as rational actors who frequently “misbehave” because of the systematic biases that affect their decisions (Thaler 2015). This is especially important when evaluating economic behavior oriented toward addressing unseen spiritual forces. While behavioral economists often use choice tests to identify the principles behind decision making, archaeologists must infer those principles from the outcomes of their decisions and the material remains they produced. A place to begin interpretation is with observed behavioral regularities found in ethnographically documented societies as test propositions for how they might reflect past ritual behavior.

The pantheistic Mesoamerican worldview placed humans in an animated landscape that required reciprocatory offerings for the resources removed and consumed in everyday life. These offerings were intended to reestablish spiritual balance for both past and future resource withdrawals. From an economic perspective, they can be viewed as a type of spiritual business transaction. Among the ancient Nahua, sacrifices to the gods were called *nextlabualiztli*, which translates as an act of repayment (López Austin 1988:74). This same transactional logic has been observed in contemporary Nahua and Otomí rituals (Lupo 1995; Sandstrom 2008; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017). Timothy Knowlton (2021), in a recent study of K’iche texts from highland Guatemala, observes that reciprocal obligations defined the relations between human

beings and the broader cosmos in which they lived and served as the foundation for their moral and ritual economy. If ritual can be seen in transactional terms, how can insights from behavioral economics productively inform us?

Archaeologists, ethnographers, and ethnohistorians have been fascinated by the scale of labor invested in civic-ceremonial structures and the places where rituals were conducted (Knapp 2009; McMahon 2013; Trigger 1990). Behavioral economics models this behavior in terms of its *transactional utility*, that is, its relative value vis-à-vis the setting and the expected return from the rituals performed. In short, the more expensive or elaborate the setting where rituals are conducted, the greater the expectation that it will lead to successful outcomes and reduced risk. This differs from the notion of *acquisitional utility* based on standard neoclassical principles, where the benefit from an offering or ritual performance should be the same regardless of the location where it was consumed or witnessed (Thaler 2015:59–60). Ritual settings are important because they affect the perceived value and return from the ritual enactments and offerings involved.

A second behavioral principle is that the expected returns from activities are often directly proportional to the amount of previous participation or investment in them. This is the *sunk cost* caveat, which contradicts neoclassical thinking that all previous expenditures (or sunk costs) are irrelevant in economic decision making.⁸ Recognition that previous expenditures affect current behavior helps explain why some of the most important sacred locales are also the oldest ritual places in societies. Investments in the labor and material to construct temples, platforms, plazas, and shrines are sunk costs that anchor important places and communal ideology in the minds of the people who use them. Sunk costs help make sacred constructions durable. Likewise, the time invested in pilgrimages or rituals at natural places such as caves or mountaintops can reinforce a tradition of repeated visitation to these locales (Hasemann-Lara and Lara-Pinto 2014, 2019).

Another facet of human behavior is *hindsight bias*. This aspect of human perception leads people to believe they knew an event would come to pass after it has occurred (Thaler 2015:21). This bias works for events that turn out good as well as bad, but on the whole, there is a tendency to remember successes over failures. This is especially the case for successful ritual outcomes, which maintains a tradition of relying on them for future results. It invokes the idea that what worked in the past will work again.

The combination of sunk costs and hindsight bias help explain what is often referred to as the *endowment effect*. This principle holds that the items people own or that are already part of their cultural toolkit (their endowment) are

held to be more valuable and reliable than things that are not. This explains the commitment to tradition at all levels of society, from resistance to adopting new foods or technology (Anderson, Chabot, and Van Gijn 2004; Kurin 1983) to adhering to established stylistic traditions⁹ and religious practices (McAnany 2010:199–252). The mantra of hindsight bias and the endowment effect professes that traditional remedies provide the best solutions to new problems. When long-standing practices are overturned, it often takes place in the context of a dramatic rejection of the old in favor of the new, as can be seen in revitalization movements and some of the rapid conversions to charismatic Christianity in Guatemala in the 1970s (Duncan 1992; Wallace 1956).

One confounding variable behavioral economics identifies is that of *inter-temporal choice*. This concept recognizes that many individuals place a higher value on consumption in the present than on consumption in the future. This is a confounding variable for explaining ritual behavior because offerings are often made against the hope of future returns. This is exactly the process involved when rituals are conducted in agricultural fields to foster healthy plant growth and a good harvest. This practice contradicts the higher value placed on consumption in the present *unless* ritual offerings are seen as something like an investment, where the value of goods offered today is multiplied several-fold into future returns—much like the effect of compound interest or organic growth.

This is precisely what Alan and Pamela Effrein Sandstrom (2017) have observed with pilgrimage ritual among contemporary Nahua groups in northern Veracruz, Mexico. The Nahua see rituals as a form of sacred exchange. They invest in goods, time, and labor to repay spirits for health, rain, prosperity and to fulfill current needs and reduce future risk (Sandstrom 2008:102–103). People target offerings to specific spirits based on individual needs within a collective community context.¹⁰ This enables individuals to measure the cost of the ritual in terms of the specific result they seek (e.g., curing, harvest, marriage, children). While this individualized view of ritual participation differs from the way archaeologists often perceive community ritual (e.g., Berdan 2007), it underscores how the concept of reciprocity can structure relationships with ritual just as it did in other socioeconomic relationships (Mauss 1990). Community ritual provided the glue that held larger socio-political units together, and their success in doing so was reinforced by parallel rituals carried out at the household level.

Behavioral economics seeks to develop descriptive models that accurately reflect human economic behavior. In this way, it deviates sharply from the normative models of human behavior employed by neoclassical economics.

As a theoretical perspective, it permits the examination of three important dimensions of ritual economy. First, it permits an approximation of what the *economy of ritual* consisted of in terms of the human effort required to organize and carry it out. Second, it facilitates an assessment of how rituals were organized and what their relationship was to leadership in society. Third and finally, it allows a more intuitive interpretation of the ritual worldview and beliefs of participants. All three of these behavioral dimensions will be examined using information from the El Cajón region and the site of Salitrón Viejo. The manner in which the presentation is organized is discussed below. The approach used is telescopic in nature. It begins at the broadest level, with an overview of chiefdom development in west-central Honduras, and gradually focuses down on ritual activity in the Salitrón community and what it informs about the development in the El Cajón region.

PRE-COLUMBIAN LIFE AND RITUAL IN WEST-CENTRAL HONDURAS

The El Cajón region is a mountainous area along the middle reaches of the Ulúa River (see figure 1.1). It includes both lowland and upland regions of the Sulaco and Humuya River valleys, and it is along the Sulaco River that the site of Salitrón Viejo is located. The pre-Columbian cultures of northwestern and west-central Honduras were non-Maya groups identified as Lenca speakers who occupied the area up through the Spanish Conquest (Chapman 1978; Gómez Zúñiga 2021; Lara-Pinto 1991a, 2021). The second chapter in this volume begins by asking what a chiefdom is and how it is represented in the archaeological record. It then presents an overview of cultural development found along the middle Ulúa River and its tributaries during the Formative and Classic periods (1600 BC–AD 1000). This discussion provides the background for the appearance of population in the El Cajón region and the development of the Salitrón community between 400 BC and AD 1000. This discussion is not a comprehensive culture history of all Honduras but instead identifies the salient features of community and ritual life that provide a comparative framework for developments at Salitrón Viejo. As such, the discussion is selective in the sites and regional surveys examined.

Chapter 3 examines the El Cajón region and cultural developments that occurred from its initial settlement around 400 BC to its final abandonment 1,400 years later. It begins with a general discussion of the regional geography and natural landscape pioneer agriculturalists encountered as they settled along the Sulaco and Humuya Rivers. The regional chronology is presented

along with resource availabilities and environmental differences between upland areas and valley bottoms. The discussion then shifts to the site of Salitrón Viejo and other communities in the El Cajón region. Salitrón was the earliest, largest, and longest-occupied community in the Sulaco valley, so its history chronicles the development of political complexity in the region. Its unique architectural layout is summarized, which includes two residential groups with elite architecture and two distinct civic-ceremonial precincts. These four zones are discussed in terms of what they indicate about community organization and ritual activity at the site and regional levels. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Salitrón Viejo's position in the El Cajón region changed over time.

The next three chapters examine the evidence for ritual activities at Salitrón Viejo in specific detail. They present the archaeological information available for reconstructing the economy of ritual in the El Cajón region. Two ritual areas were constructed at Salitrón Viejo: the Iglesia Precinct and the North Precinct. The Iglesia Precinct was the most important civic-ceremonial area in the region. The most prominent feature in this precinct was the Acropolis platform that was 2 m high and covered 0.75 ha. It was on this platform that other important structures were constructed and community celebrations were performed. Chapter 4 describes the main architectural features of the Iglesia Precinct, reconstructs its sequence of construction, and dates its different episodes of building, modification, and use. The pace of construction is discussed and the scale of architectural construction at Salitrón Viejo is compared to the broader region, along with how civic-ceremonial construction changed over time.

An important feature of ritual activity at Salitrón Viejo was the incorporation of a large quantity of jade and other high-value wealth goods as dedicatory offerings in civic-ceremonial constructions. Chapter 5 examines and describes the jade, marble, and other artifacts recovered from both ritual and non-ritual contexts. Over 3,000 pieces of lapidary regalia and other offerings were recovered in the El Cajón region, the vast majority of which were from Salitrón Viejo and date to the Late Yunque phase (AD 0–400). These materials are unique in two regards. First, the El Cajón materials are the largest in situ assemblages of finished jade and marble artifacts ever recovered from carefully excavated and dated contexts in eastern Mesoamerica. Second, this collection is associated with a non-Maya culture and provides insight into what the symbolically valued images were in a society where hereditary kingship was not the mainstay of centralized authority. These wealth goods and the different raw materials they were manufactured from are described and

illustrated to capture their diversity. This collection is important from both an archaeological and an art historical perspective because it provides new information on the diverse array of lapidary traditions operating in eastern Mesoamerica during the Early Classic period. (In addition to the illustrations provided here, a photographic catalog of key pieces from the collection is also available in Hirth and colleagues 2023.)

The types of offerings and their spatial locations represent two manifestations archaeologists employ to study ritual behavior. Chapter 6 brings the artifacts and their contextual associations together. It is one thing to look at the stylistic aspects of individual artifacts; it is another to look at how different artifact types (e.g., beads, pendants, earspools, unworked raw material) were used to form offering groups in the areas where they were deposited. This discussion explores the synergism between types of artifacts and how they were used in ritual contexts. Patterns of color, breakage, and simultaneous ritual use and deposition are examined in relation to construction episodes in the Iglesia Precinct and across Salitrón Viejo. Wealth goods and high-value ornamental regalia are often associated with the burial of high-ranking individuals in Maya sites to the west. This was not the case in the El Cajón region, which suggests that leadership followed a different, more group-oriented strategy that did not require the individual accumulation of wealth by elite to forge personal networks of power.

Chapter 7 returns to the topic of the economy and ritual. The discussion revisits the evidence for ritual activity at contemporaneous sites in northwest and west-central Honduras and compares it to evidence at Salitrón Viejo. The importance of feasting is discussed and the architectural sequence for the Iglesia Precinct is reexamined to generate an energetic estimate of the time and labor needed to construct it. Ritual spaces and their associated buildings required more than stone and mortar; they also required dedication behaviors so they could fulfill their civic and ceremonial functions. Because high-value jade artifacts were used in these dedications, an energetic estimate is also presented for the cost of obtaining a portion of the ritual assemblage. Three procurement models are then evaluated for how ritual offerings were obtained: on-site production, procurement through down-the-line exchange, and direct procurement trade.

The final chapter summarizes what the materials at Salitrón Viejo contribute to the understanding of indigenous belief systems, ritual economy, and the role that economy played in the development of its regional chiefdom. The chapter examines the imagery identified on lapidary items as a way to explore the structure of its underlying belief system. The abundance of zoomorphic

imagery suggests a strong animistic worldview. The location and treatment of ritual offerings in the Iglesia Precinct suggest that items were broken to animate civic-ceremonial structures and to provide strong spiritual protection throughout its future use-life. The broader role of ritual offerings in the natural landscape at caves and springs is also discussed as part of the broader animistic worldview. Hunched or hunchback figures are a particularly important iconographic element in the El Cajón collection, and their meaning is explored in Honduras and Mesoamerica. The diversity and stylistic richness of the collection are examined in terms of what they imply about the nature of lapidary carving traditions in eastern Mesoamerica. Finally, the discussion concludes with an evaluation of what information from the El Cajón region can contribute to a broader understanding of pre-Columbian chiefdom development in west-central Honduras.

Ritual and its associated religious beliefs and practices are difficult dimensions of pre-Columbian behavior to reconstruct solely using archaeological approaches. Nevertheless, it is through the careful analysis of empirical data that archaeological investigations can explore the ritual economy and the role it played in the organization of mid-range chiefdom societies across eastern Mesoamerica. It is hoped that the research presented here provides valuable insights into how the economy of ritual was organized and operated in the El Cajón region of west-central Honduras.