

Social Change among the Peoples of Formative-Period Mesoamerica and the Formation of Social Hierarchies

From a Mosaic of Adaptations to a Hypothesis of Durable Political Subordination

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A companion study to: *How Did Social Hierarchies Emerge in Formative-Period Mesoamerica? The Conquest Hypothesis as a Contribution to the Debate*

Abstract. This article examines social transformations in Mesoamerica between the end of the Archaic period and the Early and Middle Formative, with particular attention to their relationship to the emergence of durable inequality and political hierarchy. It begins by criticizing a linear sequence—plant domestication, agriculture, sedentism, surplus, specialization, elite formation, and the state. Evidence from Soconusco, northern Belize, Ceibal, Cuello, San Lorenzo, and Oaxaca shows that food production, sedentism, pottery, monumentality, exchange, and hierarchy did not appear everywhere in the same order. For centuries, mobile, seasonally mobile, semi-sedentary, and sedentary communities coexisted while combining cultivation, fishing, gathering, and hunting in different proportions. The article argues that this unevenness was not merely a background condition but may itself have been historically consequential: differences in mobility, access to raw materials, technologies, information, and organizational capacity could generate asymmetries between entire communities. Building on an earlier study of the origins of hierarchy, the article formulates a revised and testable conquest hypothesis. Under particular conditions, partially agricultural and semi-sedentary groups that retained substantial mobility may have enjoyed strategic advantages. Recurrent raiding could then, in some cases, have developed into enforced prestations, durable subordination, tribute, and hereditary political authority. This proposal is not presented as a universal explanation of Mesoamerican development, but as a regional model to be tested against competing mechanisms through settlement, bioarchaeological, technological, and conflict-related evidence.

Keywords: Mesoamerica; Formative period; sedentism; mobility; agriculture; social hierarchy; obsidian; exchange; warfare; conquest; tribute; state formation.

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1. Introduction: from the mechanism of hierarchy to the reconstruction of the social field

The companion article, *How Did Social Hierarchies Emerge in Formative-Period Mesoamerica? The Conquest Hypothesis as a Contribution to the Debate*, began by separating three phenomena that are often collapsed into a single process: status inequality, durable political hierarchy, and the state. Differences in prestige, richer burials, larger houses, craft specialization, or monumental architecture do not in themselves demonstrate that one group possessed a hereditary and enforceable right to the labor, products, or prestations of others. The earlier study therefore focused on the *mechanism by which difference might be transformed into durable subordination* (Kotlarz 2026a).

The present article moves one analytical step backward. Before asking how a durable relation of domination arose, we need to reconstruct the *social landscape* in which such a relation could emerge. Popular accounts, and occasionally broad academic syntheses, still portray roughly 2000–800 BCE as a relatively uniform movement toward sedentary agriculture and increasing social complexity. This is a useful shorthand, but it obscures one of the most important features of the archaeological record: the regional and local unevenness of change.

At the same time, Mesoamerica contained mobile, seasonally mobile, semi-sedentary, and sedentary groups; communities relying primarily on wild resources, horticultural populations, and villages in which cultivation gradually became more important. Some communities used pottery, while others did not. In some regions status differentiation appeared early; elsewhere formal ceremonial spaces emerged while permanent households remained difficult to identify. This mosaic was not simply an imperfect transitional stage on a predetermined road to later states. It could itself create asymmetries, dependencies, conflicts, and political opportunities.

The central proposition of this study is therefore that **the hierarchization of some Formative-period Mesoamerican societies should be analyzed not only as internal differentiation within sedentary villages, but also as a possible outcome of interaction among communities positioned differently along economic, residential, and organizational trajectories**. Mobility, cultivation, material circulation, technology, ritual, and conflict should thus be treated not as isolated “causes,” but as components of historically variable configurations.

The term “Formative period” is used here broadly and comparatively. Regional chronologies differ, and “Preclassic” is more usual in Maya archaeology. The dates 2000–800 BCE are therefore heuristic rather than a single periodization imposed on every region.

2. The trap of the linear model

A familiar sequence can be summarized as follows:

plant domestication → *agriculture* → *sedentism* → *surplus* → *specialization* → *elite* → *state*.

Every element in this chain refers to a real process. The problem lies in treating their order as universal and causally automatic. Research on early cultivation in Mesoamer-

ica shows that domestication unfolded over millennia. Microbotanical evidence from the Central Balsas region indicates very early maize domestication, while evidence from Guilá Naquitz and other sites documents a long period of plant management and cultivation before societies became fully sedentary agricultural communities (Smith 1997; Piperno and Flannery 2001; Piperno et al. 2009; Ranere et al. 2009).

The expression “agricultural revolution” can therefore mislead when it suggests the rapid replacement of one subsistence system by another. A better model is a long-term change in proportions: wild resources were increasingly supplemented by managed and cultivated plants; the contribution of crops grew unevenly; only much later, and only in some regions, did maize become the dominant basis of subsistence.

Agriculture should not be equated with full sedentism. A community can cultivate crops while moving seasonally. It can return to the same fields or garden plots, combine horticulture with fishing and gathering, and shift residential bases after several years. Such intermediate forms are among the hardest to identify archaeologically because they leave less durable architecture than multigenerational villages.

Pottery likewise is a valuable indicator of reduced mobility, but not a simple test for sedentism. Heavy and fragile vessels are easier to use when people remain longer in one place, yet seasonally mobile communities can also use pottery. Conversely, the absence of ceramics does not imply the absence of cultivation. Northern Belize provides direct evidence for maize and other domesticates in preceramic contexts (Rosenswig et al. 2014).

The linear model therefore breaks down at its first steps. Domestication, food production, sedentism, and pottery were related processes, but they were not identical and did not always occur synchronously.

3. A “mosaic of adaptation” as a more adequate model

Robert M. Rosenswig described the Archaic archaeological record of Mesoamerica as a “mosaic of adaptation” (Rosenswig 2015). The phrase is equally useful for the transition into the Early Formative, when multiple ways of life overlapped for long periods.

Around 1500–1000 BCE, at least six heuristic forms of organization can be distinguished without assuming that they were consecutive rungs on a single ladder:

1. relatively mobile groups relying mainly on wild resources;
2. mobile or seasonally mobile groups already cultivating maize, squash, or other plants;
3. semi-sedentary communities returning regularly to the same locations and fields;
4. small sedentary villages with mixed economies combining cultivation, fishing, gathering, and hunting;
5. sedentary communities with more visible status differentiation;
6. larger ceremonial and political centers that did not always conform to a simple model of a permanently settled “farming town.”

The decisive point is coexistence. These forms could occur simultaneously and within interacting landscapes. Communities exchanged goods and information, intermarried,

assembled for ritual, competed over resources, and sometimes fought. The analytical danger of speaking about “Mesoamerican society” in the singular is that it erases precisely the differences that may have generated historical change.

This formulation also has a methodological consequence. Archaeology tends to make durable settlements more visible than mobile populations. Houses rebuilt in the same place, storage pits, platforms, middens, cemeteries, and repeated construction produce dense archaeological signatures. Seasonally occupied camps and mobile activity zones are easier to miss. Consequently, the archaeological record may systematically under-represent mobile and semi-sedentary groups. This is not proof of any particular missing population, but it is a reason to avoid assuming that the most visible settlements represented the full social landscape.

4. Domestication, food production, and sedentism as asynchronous processes

4.1. Cultivated plants before “full agriculture”

The earliest evidence for domestication does not equal a later agricultural economy. Early Holocene maize in the Central Balsas and the still earlier history of squash domestication show that plant management preceded permanent farming villages by millennia (Smith 1997; Piperno et al. 2009; Ranere et al. 2009). Cultivation was initially one component within broader subsistence strategies rather than an immediate replacement for hunting, gathering, and fishing.

This distinction matters for models of hierarchy. If cultivation long preceded full sedentism, then the appearance of crops cannot by itself explain the emergence of political inequality. What matters is how food production interacted with storage, demography, territorial attachment, labor organization, and relations between communities.

4.2. Coasts and estuaries: sedentism need not begin with farming

Highly productive aquatic environments complicate any simple agriculture-first narrative. On the Pacific coast of Chiapas, Archaic Chantuto communities intensively exploited estuarine resources long before later village societies emerged. In the Soconusco region, pre-pottery populations combined aquatic resources with increasing use of cultivated plants (Voorhies 2004; Kennett et al. 2010).

Sedentism therefore could be encouraged by locally abundant, predictable wild resources as well as by cultivation. The causal sequence could vary: in one landscape cultivation encouraged longer stays; in another rich fisheries and estuaries reduced mobility first, while agriculture intensified later.

4.3. Archaeological visibility and the underestimation of mobility

The transition from mobility to sedentism was a continuum rather than a binary switch. Residential mobility, logistical mobility, seasonal aggregation, repeated return to favored locations, horticultural camps, and multiyear residential shifts can all produce different archaeological signatures. Recent work in northern Belize illustrates how

land-use models can identify complex combinations of movement and increasingly intensive plant use rather than a simple nomad/farmer dichotomy (Rosenswig et al. 2014; Brouwer Burg and Harrison-Buck 2024).

This problem is central to the present hypothesis. If mobile groups are less archaeologically visible, their roles as carriers of raw materials, information, technical knowledge, ritual participation, or conflict may be underestimated relative to permanent villages.

5. Regional sequences of change

5.1. Soconusco: social rank before full maize dependence

Soconusco is especially important because its long sequence demonstrates gradual change rather than a single agricultural threshold. Coastal communities increasingly used pottery and permanent settlements while continuing to exploit estuarine, wetland, and wild resources. Early villages such as Paso de la Amada show social differentiation and public architecture without evidence for a fully developed system of economic class domination (Blake et al. 1992, 1995; Blake and Clark 1999; Lesure and Blake 2002).

The chronology of maize intensification is equally significant. Rosenswig and colleagues (2015) argued that a marked increase in maize use around 1000 cal BCE occurred centuries after the first ceramic village communities and after some forms of social ranking were already present. This strongly undermines a universal sequence in which agricultural intensification must first generate surplus and only then produce rank.

Paso de la Amada also illustrates the distinction made in the companion article: architectural differences and differential prestige do not automatically demonstrate an enforceable right to tribute. Status differentiation may precede the institutionalization of durable political subordination.

5.2. Northern Belize: horticulture before pottery and uneven sedentism

Archaic sites in the Freshwater Creek drainage yielded stone tools preserving starch grains from maize and other domesticates. These communities were not simply “pure foragers”; their economies incorporated plant processing and cultivation while ceramic production and fully permanent villages were still absent (Rosenswig et al. 2014).

Northern Belize therefore reveals a continuum between mobility and village life. Lithic assemblages from sites such as Caye Coco and nearby localities document different activities within settlement systems that cannot be reduced to a binary contrast between nomads and farmers.

Cuello, by contrast, shows the consolidation of permanent households more clearly than Ceibal. Revised chronologies place durable settlement and pottery around 1000 BCE rather than at the extremely early dates once proposed for the Swasey phase (Hammond 1991; MacLellan 2024). Houses, patios, and mortuary practices tied families to particular places and ancestors. Such durable household claims may also have provided new arenas for competition and inherited social differentiation.

5.3. Ceibal: a ceremonial center without immediate full sedentism

Ceibal provides one of the strongest arguments against equating monumentality with prior complete sedentism. Around 1000 BCE a formal ceremonial complex emerged whose layout was connected to broader southern Mesoamerican traditions (Inomata et al. 2013). Yet household and settlement evidence suggests that some of the population using the center may still have retained substantial mobility. Inomata and colleagues (2015) proposed the coexistence of groups with differing degrees of sedentism who gathered for ceremonies and collective projects.

This separates two processes often assumed to coincide: the creation of formal public space and the emergence of dense, permanently occupied household settlement. More regular and durable household complexes become clearer only later, especially during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (MacLellan 2019, 2024).

Ceibal is therefore also relevant to the earlier article: monumental construction should not be treated as direct evidence that an elite already possessed coercive power over labor. Public works can also reflect cooperation, periodic aggregation, and shared ritual; further evidence is needed to establish when coordination became durable asymmetrical authority.

5.4. Aguada Fénix: monumentality and collective action

Aguada Fénix reinforces the argument that monumental construction need not be a straightforward product of mature hierarchy. Its enormous platform, built primarily around 1000–800 BCE, lacks the unambiguous contemporary royal self-representation characteristic of later Maya kingship. Inomata and colleagues (2020) interpret the site as evidence for the importance of large-scale collective mobilization in the beginnings of Maya civilization.

This does not prove strict egalitarianism. It shows instead that the scale of public construction cannot serve as a simple proxy for the scale of inequality. The capacity for collective action must be distinguished from the capacity of a restricted group to enforce regular prestations.

5.5. San Lorenzo: long-distance obsidian circulation without simple proof of elite control

San Lorenzo is central to debates over exchange. Analysis of 852 obsidian artifacts identified multiple geological sources, with material moving approximately 300–600 km during phases extending back to about 1800 BCE (Hirth et al. 2013). Long-distance circulation of raw material is therefore an established fact.

It does not automatically follow that merchants, caravans, markets, or centralized elite monopolies already existed. Obsidian could move through direct procurement, seasonal mobility, down-the-line exchange, gift relations, marriage networks, ritual gatherings, mobile intermediaries, specialized suppliers, or increasingly regular economic exchange. The term “trade” is too broad when it collapses the movement of objects into one assumed institutional mechanism.

For theories of hierarchy the distinction is crucial. The presence of obsidian does not demonstrate that elites controlled its sources, production, or distribution. A causal

argument requires evidence for privileged access, concentration of production, and a political mechanism by which such control was transformed into obligations imposed on others.

5.6. Oaxaca: from village raiding to conquest states

Oaxaca offers the most developed long-term sequence for the history of violence. Flannery and Marcus (2003) argued that raiding between early sedentary villages appeared after about 1500 BCE, long before mature state institutions. Spencer (2003) emphasized the later transition toward territorial warfare and political expansion.

The strongest evidence linking conquest directly to primary state formation is later, especially in the rise and expansion of Monte Albán. Spencer (2010) demonstrated a close temporal relationship between territorial expansion and state formation in Oaxaca. That later sequence cannot simply be projected backward onto Soconusco or the Gulf Coast several centuries earlier.

A more cautious inference is nevertheless important: **violence need not be a product of an already established hierarchy**. It can exist among relatively small-scale societies and, under specific circumstances, become one process contributing to centralization and durable subordination.

6. Comparative table: uneven transformation, c. 1500–800 BCE

The following table is heuristic. It does not classify every community in a region under one label. Its purpose is to make visible the coexistence of different configurations of subsistence, settlement, and social organization.

Region	c. 1500 BCE	c. 1200 BCE	c. 1000 BCE	c. 800 BCE
Soconusco	Ceramic villages coexist with broad use of wild and aquatic resources; early ranking visible.	Local centers and interregional networks expand; mixed subsistence remains important.	Stronger maize intensification; changes in political scale.	More visible elites and feasting in some centers, including Cuauhtémoc.
Gulf Coast / San Lorenzo	Large village and increasing centrality; obsidian from distant sources.	Monumentality and political centrality expand.	Major center with extensive raw-material networks.	Reconfiguration after San Lorenzo's decline.
Oaxaca	Early sedentary villages; beginnings of intercommunity conflict.	Increasing settlement competition and local status differentiation.	San José Mogote and regional networks gain importance.	Greater centralization preceding the foundation of Monte Albán.

Region	c. 1500 BCE	c. 1200 BCE	c. 1000 BCE	c. 800 BCE
Northern Belize / Cuello	Mobile and semi-sedentary traditions remain visible in the broader landscape; horticulture already known.	Transition to more durable settlement in selected locations.	Permanent houses and pottery consolidated around this time; household and ancestor practices deepen.	Multigenerational households and more visible social differentiation.
Ceibal / parts of Maya Lowlands	Mobile and semi-mobile cultivators; permanent villages archaeologically sparse.	More durable settlement begins in some zones.	Formal ceremonial center with incomplete sedentism among part of the population.	Increasingly durable households and developing local hierarchy.

The comparison makes the absence of a single sequence visible. Around 1000 BCE, maize use intensified in Soconusco; San Lorenzo already had centuries of long-distance obsidian circulation and monumentality; Ceibal developed a formal ceremonial center while some participants remained mobile; and Cuello consolidated permanent household life. Treating all of these as one stage of “early civilization” erases the mechanisms created by their differences.

7. From diversity of lifeways to asymmetry between communities

Research on the origins of hierarchy usually focuses on differences *within* a community: house size, burials, access to exotic goods, feasting, ritual control, craft specialization, or surplus management. These variables are necessary, but not sufficient.

Differences also existed *between* communities. One group might control fertile land and a large resident population; another might have privileged access to estuaries; another might know obsidian sources, mountain passes, or river routes. Some communities were strongly tied to fields, houses, and stores; others retained greater mobility and broader territorial knowledge. Some centers could periodically gather very large populations for ceremonies even when everyday settlement remained dispersed.

Such asymmetries could create advantages, dependencies, and intergroup specializations before mature social classes existed. A community near a raw-material source might possess geographic access without political monopoly. A mobile group might act as a carrier of information or material. A sedentary village might hold larger stores yet be more vulnerable to attack at harvest time. A ceremonial center might integrate dispersed groups and create new opportunities for leadership without immediately producing a monopoly of force.

This is the bridge between the two articles. The first asked how status could become durable power. The present study specifies that such mechanisms operated in a world where communities possessed unequal combinations of resources, mobility, and organizational capacity.

8. Long-distance material circulation: why “trade” cannot serve as an explanatory shortcut

A common interpretive shortcut proceeds as follows: exotic goods came from far away, therefore trade existed; trade required intermediaries; intermediaries controlled prestige goods; control created elites.

Each step requires independent evidence.

Hirth and colleagues (2013) demonstrated a multisource obsidian procurement system at San Lorenzo. They did not demonstrate that a centralized merchant caste existed from the beginning, nor that elites monopolized ordinary obsidian tools. In central Mexico, work at Altica likewise reconstructs local and interregional obsidian networks while emphasizing the complexity of exchange mechanisms (Nichols and Stoner 2019).

For the Early Formative, possible mechanisms include:

1. direct procurement expeditions;
2. raw-material movement embedded in seasonal mobility;
3. down-the-line exchange between neighboring groups;
4. gifts and kinship obligations;
5. exchange at ritual gatherings;
6. mobile intermediaries;
7. specialized producers or suppliers;
8. increasingly regular economic exchange developing from earlier forms.

This vocabulary preserves the empirical fact of long-distance circulation without prematurely importing institutions better documented for later societies.

9. Semi-sedentary communities as a potentially distinctive moment of transformation

An earlier formulation of the conquest hypothesis, inspired by classical coercive theories, could suggest a simple contrast: mobile hunter-gatherers conquer sedentary farmers. For Early Formative Mesoamerica this model is too schematic. Societies did not fall into two clean categories.

A more interesting possibility is that under some conditions communities in an *intermediate* position had strategic advantages: partly agricultural and semi-sedentary, but still highly mobile.

Such a group could combine:

- some food security derived from cultivation;
- the ability to store part of its production;
- seasonal or semi-permanent residential bases;
- knowledge of extensive routes, rivers, passes, and raw-material sources;
- relations with multiple communities;

- greater flexibility in shifting concentrations of people;
- the ability to transfer information and technologies across regions.

Full sedentism offers demographic and productive advantages, but it raises the cost of relocation. Fields, houses, stores, and infrastructure cannot be moved quickly. Fully mobile lifeways provide flexibility but make it harder to maintain large, concentrated populations and durable stores. Semi-sedentism may temporarily combine parts of both strategic packages.

This is not an argument that semi-sedentism inherently produces aggression. It is a hypothesis about *potential strategic advantage*. In a context of conflict, such communities might more easily raid seasonally, choose moments after harvest, move fighters rapidly, withdraw, and exploit broad landscape knowledge.

10. Not one invention, but a technological-organizational package

Archaeological explanation can overvalue single inventions. Obsidian blades, improved stoneworking, or more effective projectile weapons may matter, but one innovation alone is unlikely to create a durable ruling stratum.

A synergistic package is more plausible. Potential advantage could derive from a combination of:

- access to high-quality raw materials;
- technical knowledge for transforming them;
- effective weapons and tools;
- cultivation and storage;
- seasonal mobility;
- riverine or coastal transport where available;
- information and contact networks;
- the ability to mobilize larger groups rapidly.

This “technological-organizational package” need not initially be controlled by an elite. It can operate within households, kin groups, or mobile networks. Only under particular circumstances might some of its components become politically appropriated.

The relevant question is therefore not whether “obsidian created power,” but whether access to obsidian and technical knowledge, combined with mobility and organization, gave some communities an advantage that could later be converted into durable domination.

11. From raid to tribute: a possible mechanism for institutionalizing violence

The most important distinction in the revised conquest hypothesis is between raiding and durable subordination.

A raid is episodic. Its goals may include food, captives, valuables, prestige, vengeance, or deterrence. The attackers leave and do not establish a permanent apparatus of control.

Territorial subordination begins when victors replace one-time plunder with expectations of recurrent payment or service and possess the means to enforce those expectations. This creates new organizational problems:

- who must provide what and how much;
- how prestations are collected repeatedly;
- how refusal is punished;
- how local leaders are supervised or co-opted;
- how warriors and supporters are rewarded;
- how the new order is legitimized;
- how authority is transmitted to the next generation.

A possible sequence is:

seasonal raids → *recurrent exactions* → *political dependence* → *tribute* → *institutions of enforcement and legitimation* → *hereditary hierarchy*.

This sequence addresses a missing link identified in the companion article. Prestige, ritual, exchange, and managerial functions can generate position and resources, but they do not always explain why others cannot refuse obligations. Violence, or a credible threat of violence, provides one possible enforcement mechanism. Yet violence alone is insufficient: many societies wage war without creating states. The key transition is from episodic conflict to a durable institution of extraction.

12. A tighter link to the companion article: revising the conquest hypothesis

The first article presented conquest as an alternative contribution to a debate that includes multicausal models, prestige competition and feasting, ritual and ideology, control of exchange, demographic-managerial explanations, warfare and coercion, and the older Olmec “mother culture” concept (Kotlarz 2026a).

The present analysis requires an important revision.

A simplified version that should be rejected

“Mobile hunter-gatherers attacked sedentary farmers and thereby created an elite.”

This version draws too sharp a boundary between mobile and sedentary populations, assumes high organizational capacity among attackers without explaining its source, and implies a single founding event that should leave an easily visible archaeological break.

The revised version

Communities occupying an intermediate stage of transformation—partly agricultural and semi-sedentary, yet still highly mobile—may in some regions have gained advantages through a combination of mobility, access to raw materials, technology, stores, information, and growing organizational capacity. Recurrent raids could then be transformed into enforced prestations, durable control over people and territory, and hereditary political hierarchy.

This formulation has several analytical advantages. First, it does not require a pre-existing “aristocracy.” War leadership can begin as situational and become durable only after successful extraction creates resources for followers and coercion. Second, it does not require long-distance “trade” in a modern or highly institutionalized sense; mobility networks and material circulation can provide knowledge, contacts, and technologies. Third, it does not posit a single wave of conquerors or one conquering culture. The process could occur locally, repeatedly, and with different outcomes. Fourth, it is compatible with substantial continuity in pottery, domestic architecture, and ritual. A small dominant group may adopt local styles and employ local craftspeople. Material continuity therefore does not automatically disprove political subordination, although the absence of other predicted evidence would weaken the model.

13. A scientific hypothesis must be falsifiable

The revised conquest hypothesis should not be protected by claiming that every expected trace “might have disappeared.” Its value depends on predictions that can distinguish it from competing models.

Evidence category	Expectations under mainly internal competition/status models	Additional expectations under a mobile/semi-sedentary subordination model
Biological origins of elites	Broad local continuity; status differentiation develops within the resident population.	Greater probability of some nonlocal individuals in the earliest privileged burials; not necessarily a majority of the population.
Settlement	Gradual differentiation among households and centers.	Possible settlement shifts, population concentration, defensible locations, or buffer zones; none need occur universally.

Evidence category	Internal model	Subordination model
Violence	Conflict may increase with local elite competition.	Conflict indicators should converge chronologically with the onset of durable political asymmetry; skeletal trauma, fortifications, destruction, and weapons are most meaningful as a bundle rather than a single marker.
Material culture	Gradual local development.	Substantial local continuity may coexist with political change; human mobility and raw-material sourcing become especially important.
Obsidian and technology	Unequal access may reflect growing status or exchange.	Test for links among mobility, source access, specialist knowledge, and political transformation rather than merely the presence of exotic goods.
Prestations and storage	Redistribution may grow from coordination.	Look for a transition from voluntary exchange to regular asymmetrical transfers, indirectly visible through centralized storage, standardized obligations, or production control.

The strongest test would be the convergence of multiple independent indicators within precise local chronologies. One nonlocal burial does not prove conquest. One burned layer does not prove elite replacement. Obsidian blades do not prove military superiority. The model requires patterned co-occurrence.

14. How should Mesoamerica be compared at 1500, 1200, 1000, and 800 BCE?

A productive research program would compare several regions at equivalent chronological cross-sections while respecting local chronologies. For each region, researchers should reconstruct in parallel:

- the relative importance of mobile, semi-sedentary, and sedentary groups;
- the balance between domesticates and wild resources;

- the durability of households and kin-based institutions;
- settlement size and settlement hierarchy;
- plazas, platforms, and ceremonial centers;
- the scale and direction of obsidian and other raw-material circulation;
- the location of specialized production;
- indicators of status differentiation;
- evidence of conflict and defensibility;
- biological origin and mobility among elite and non-elite burials;
- the first evidence for regular transfers of resources toward centers or privileged groups.

Such comparison helps distinguish three kinds of relationships too often conflated:

1. **conditions of possibility**—for example, surplus can support people who do not continuously produce food;
2. **mechanisms creating asymmetry**—for example, information monopoly, prestige, coercion, or control of a strategic resource;
3. **mechanisms of stabilization and legitimation**—for example, ritual, genealogy, ideology, and hereditary office.

The companion article criticized multicausal explanations when these analytical levels were merged. The present study adds that even the conditions of possibility appeared at different times. In one region monumentality could precede full sedentism; elsewhere status differentiation could precede maize intensification; in another long-distance raw-material circulation existed centuries before mature state institutions.

15. Discussion: hierarchization as multiple local trajectories

There was no single cause of social hierarchy in Mesoamerica. This does not mean that explanation should be replaced by a list of factors. A scientific model must specify sequence, mechanism, and boundary conditions.

The evidence reviewed here supports several conclusions.

First, **agriculture and sedentism were not one process**. Cultivation could coexist with seasonal mobility, while sedentism could also be promoted by productive aquatic environments without complete agricultural dependence.

Second, **monumentality is not automatic evidence for an autocratic elite**. Ceibal and Aguada Fénix demonstrate the importance of collective projects and periodic integration at times when classic forms of hereditary rulership are not yet unambiguous.

Third, **exotic goods are not automatic evidence for elite-controlled trade**. San Lorenzo documents early and extensive obsidian circulation, but its mechanisms and degree of political control must be demonstrated separately.

Fourth, **violence can predate the state**. Oaxaca preserves a long sequence from village raiding to later territorial expansion. This does not show that every early hierarchy

arose through conquest, but it prevents warfare from being treated only as a product of established states.

Fifth, **the unevenness of change may itself have been causal**. Communities with different degrees of mobility and organization possessed different vulnerabilities and advantages. Their interactions could generate dependencies that would not exist in a hypothetical landscape of identical sedentary villages.

This final point most closely links the two articles. The first asked how status difference might be transformed into durable authority. The second suggests that the initial asymmetry may have arisen not only from competition among individuals within communities, but also from historically variable advantages held by entire groups.

16. Conclusion

Formative-period Mesoamerica was not a unilinear transition from nomadism to agriculture, from agriculture to sedentism, and from sedentism to hierarchy. It was a prolonged period in which multiple lifeways coexisted and interacted.

Plant domestication preceded full sedentism by millennia. Cultivation could occur among mobile and semi-sedentary populations. Early villages long retained mixed economies. Some ceremonial centers appeared before most participants left durable household remains. Long-distance raw-material circulation existed before mature political institutions, and status differentiation could precede full agricultural intensification.

Under such conditions, hierarchization should be understood as a set of local trajectories. Prestige competition may have mattered in some communities, ritual and collective organization in others, resource control, demography, or coercion elsewhere. None should be treated as a universal mechanism.

The revised conquest hypothesis is deliberately limited and testable. It does not claim that hunter-gatherers created the states of Mesoamerica. It proposes only that, within a mosaic of communities differing in mobility, groups occupying an intermediate position may sometimes have held strategic advantages: they could already produce and store some food while retaining mobility, links to distant resources, and an ability to concentrate people rapidly. Where recurrent raiding developed into regular exactions, such relations could provide one pathway from conflict to durable political hierarchy.

The main contribution, however, is not the acceptance or rejection of that hypothesis. It is a change in the question. Rather than assume that all communities traveled the same road, research should reconstruct **specific regional sequences**: who was mobile, who was sedentary, who produced stores, who had access to raw materials, how networks operated, when violence appeared, and when there is first evidence for an enforceable right to prestations.

Only such an approach can determine whether hierarchy resulted primarily from internal competition, collective organization, economic control, intergroup coercion, or—most plausibly—different combinations of these mechanisms in different places and times.

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