

How Did Social Hierarchies Emerge in Formative-Period Mesoamerica?

The Conquest Hypothesis as a Contribution to the Debate

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Abstract

This article examines the origins of durable social and political hierarchies in Formative-period Mesoamerica. It discusses seven major approaches: multicausal models, prestige competition and feasting, ritual-ideological explanations, control of exchange and prestige goods, demographic-managerial models, warfare and coercion, and the Olmec mother-culture hypothesis. It argues that these models often describe the conditions, means of legitimation, or consequences of hierarchy, but do not always explain how status differences became a hereditary and enforceable right to the labor and prestations of others. As a hypothesis requiring further testing, the article proposes a version of conquest theory adapted to Mesoamerican conditions. It identifies the conditions required for such a system to endure and formulates archaeological predictions that could distinguish it from competing models.

Keywords: Mesoamerica; Formative period; social hierarchy; state formation; conquest; tribute; coercion

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One of the most important problems facing scholars of Formative-period Mesoamerican societies is how, between approximately 1600 and 800 BCE, durable social and political hierarchies emerged in certain regions. These dates should be treated as approximate, because the chronology of the Formative period varies from one region to another. Nor did all communities undergo comparable transformations at the same time. Alongside large sedentary centers, there existed smaller farming, fishing-and-farming, and hunting-and-gathering communities, as well as groups that retained a considerable degree of mobility.

At the outset, three phenomena that are often combined in the literature must be distinguished: status inequality, durable political hierarchy, and the state. Differences in prestige or household size need not yet indicate the emergence of a ruling class, while the existence of hereditary leaders is not automatically equivalent to the formation of a state equipped with a specialized administrative apparatus. My hypothesis concerns primarily the origin of a durable relationship of political subordination. Only within that framework can we ask whether, and at what point, this relationship assumed a state form.

The Main Hypotheses Concerning the Origins of Hierarchy

1. The Multicausal and Regional Model

The most widespread current approach assumes that hierarchical societies did not arise through the operation of a single factor. Hierarchy is instead said to have resulted from the interaction of population growth, increasing sedentism, agricultural intensification, competition among settlements and lineages, long-distance exchange, craft specialization, ritual, ideology, and, at times, warfare. Different regions - Oaxaca, Soconusco, the Gulf Coast, central Mexico, and the Maya area - are understood to have followed different paths and to have changed at different rates.

The strength of this approach lies in its rejection of a simple, unilinear sequence leading from an egalitarian village through chiefdom to state. Its weakness, however, is that a list of co-occurring phenomena can take the place of an explanation of the causal mechanism. For a multicausal model to be genuinely explanatory, it should specify which factors preceded the emergence of hierarchy, which merely created conditions that made it possible, and which were already consequences of elite action.

It cannot simply be assumed that trade, sedentism, or increased production appeared only after hierarchy had emerged. At San Lorenzo, for example, obsidian from multiple sources hundreds of kilometers away was already being imported during the earliest phases of occupation. Yet the mere existence of exchange does not prove that it was controlled by an elite or that it generated a right to levy prestations. The question is therefore not 'did trade exist?' but 'how could participation in exchange be transformed into durable power over others?' The multicausal model often leaves this stage unexplained.

2. The Hypothesis of Prestige Competition, Feasting, and 'Aggrandizing Leaders'

According to this hypothesis, durable hierarchy began with competition among individuals and families for prestige. Organizers of feasts, ceremonies, and gift exchange are thought to have attracted supporters through conspicuous generosity by providing food, drink, ornaments, and exotic objects. Personal prestige, initially unstable, was then converted into power, transmitted to descendants, and consolidated through symbols of status. The Mokaya communities of Soconusco, especially Paso de la Amada, are a classic example.

The strongest objection to this model should not be the claim that a society organized around families could not produce ambitious individuals. Competition for position can also occur within kinship and household structures. The difficulty lies elsewhere: the model does not adequately explain how prestige acquired through generosity became a hereditary and enforceable right to the labor or products of others.

Paso de la Amada illustrates this problem well. Research there indicates clear architectural differences among households, but much weaker evidence for corresponding economic differentiation in the distribution of objects. Status differences

may therefore have existed without yet being closely tied to control over the economy. Such a situation does not automatically show that the organizer of a feast became a ruler, still less that this person acquired a durable right to tribute.

The 'aggrandizing leaders' hypothesis therefore requires an additional link: it must show how personal popularity was transformed into a monopoly of force, hereditary office, exclusive access to particular resources, or a right to regular prestations. Without that link, it describes the differentiation of prestige rather than the origin of durable political subordination.

3. The Ritual-Ideological Hypothesis and Collective-Action Models

According to the ritual-ideological hypothesis, hierarchy developed together with public ritual, the construction of plazas and temples, ancestor cults, calendrical systems, and specialized religious knowledge. Individuals presenting themselves as intermediaries between human beings and supernatural forces could act as guarantors of rain, fertility, and cosmic order, while also organizing ceremonies and collective labor.

More recent collective-action models rightly emphasize that monumental architecture need not have been imposed by coercion from the outset. A community could voluntarily participate in projects from which it derived religious, social, or economic benefits. Ritual, too, could simultaneously reinforce the community and generate hierarchy.

The question remains, however, why the organizer of a collective undertaking should have acquired a durable right to dispose of the labor of others. Coordination is not yet sovereignty, and ritual knowledge is not yet a right to tribute. The ritual model explains well how existing power could be legitimized and the costs of maintaining it reduced, but it is far less successful at explaining the moment when collective action became an asymmetrical and hereditary political relationship.

From the perspective of the conquest hypothesis, ritual need not be removed from the explanation. It can be assigned a different role: ritual need not have created the initial inequality, but it could consolidate it, present it as part of the cosmic order, incorporate conquered people into a new system, and reduce the need for continuous violence.

4. The Hypothesis of Control over Exchange, Craft Production, and Prestige Goods

This hypothesis proposes that elites emerged through privileged access to long-distance exchange networks and control over the production and distribution of jade, obsidian, shell, iron-ore mirrors, ornaments, pottery, and other prestige goods. Such objects are thought to have been used to reward supporters, forge alliances, and mark status materially.

The existence of exchange or craft production should not itself be questioned. Early obsidian networks at San Lorenzo were extensive, and later phases included workshops associated with the production of monuments. Craft production could take place both within households and in more concentrated locations. The absence of a clearly defined

professional merchant class does not imply the absence of exchange, just as the absence of mass specialization does not exclude highly skilled producers.

The criticism should address a different problem. Prestige objects can reveal and reinforce status differences, but they do not yet demonstrate that their owners controlled the production of basic goods or possessed a right to the labor of others. It is necessary to identify not only unequal access to exotic objects, but also the mechanism by which such access became a political obligation. If luxury goods occur mainly in elite contexts, this may be either a cause or a consequence of hierarchy. Correlation alone does not establish causal sequence.

5. The Demographic-Agricultural and Managerial Hypothesis

According to this approach, population growth, permanent settlement, and the intensification of agricultural production created a need to coordinate labor, store food, manage water and land, distribute surpluses, and organize large concentrations of people. Coordinators are then thought to have converted their functions into hereditary privileges.

Here too, conditions that made hierarchy possible must be distinguished from its direct cause. The regular production of surplus could support a group that did not participate continuously in food production. It does not follow, however, that surplus itself created an elite. A community could store resources at the level of households, lineages, or the settlement as a whole without establishing a hereditary right of one group to the products of others.

The managerial model should therefore answer two questions. First, did undertakings requiring permanent, supra-household management actually exist before durable hierarchy appeared? Second, what mechanism prevented the community from dismissing the coordinator and allowed the coordinator's family to inherit the office? Without explaining the moment when a public function was appropriated, the model assumes what it is supposed to explain.

Nor can it be claimed for Mesoamerica as a whole that population growth always followed the emergence of hierarchy. Regional sequences differed. A stronger argument is to demand evidence of local temporal priority: demographic pressure and intensification would have to clearly precede political change, rather than merely accompany the development of a center already managed by an elite.

6. The Hypothesis of Warfare, Territorial Competition, and Coercion

According to this theory, external threat and competition for land and resources encouraged population concentration, the rise of war leaders, the subordination of weaker settlements, centralization, and the hereditary transmission of command. In the environmental-circumscription variant, defeated groups could not simply move to new territories and were therefore forced to submit to the victors.

This hypothesis is close to the model proposed here, but it is not identical to it. Military threat alone may strengthen leadership within a community without yet producing a division between conquerors and subjects. Likewise, victory in a single encounter does not automatically create a durable tributary system. The crucial issue is the transition from raid to regular exploitation.

Evidence for the scale and role of warfare during the Formative period is uneven and disputed. In Oaxaca, the clearest debate about conquest concerns primarily the Late and Terminal Formative periods and the expansion of Monte Alban. A later model of territorial warfare therefore cannot be projected onto the beginnings of hierarchy in Soconusco or on the Gulf Coast without additional evidence.

A coercive model nevertheless has an advantage over prestige-based approaches when it does not treat war merely as a response to overpopulation. Conflict could also result from the seasonal availability of resources, unequal vulnerability of settlements to attack, control of routes, disputes over fishing grounds, land, water, sacred places, or people. Research should therefore focus on the specific conditions that allowed victors to retain power after fighting had ended.

7. The Olmec 'Mother Culture' Hypothesis

The historically influential Olmec 'mother culture' hypothesis held that hierarchical institutions, monumental art, divine rulership, and certain ceremonial patterns first emerged in Gulf Coast centers, especially San Lorenzo, and then spread to other regions.

This hypothesis may explain the diffusion of symbols, styles, or practices, but it does not explain the original emergence of hierarchy. It merely relocates the question: instead of asking where hierarchy came from in Mesoamerica, one must ask where it came from at San Lorenzo. Moreover, current approaches emphasize not only Gulf Coast influence but also the growth of large settlements, local craft traditions, and architecture in other regions. The spread of a style need not imply the transfer of ready-made political institutions.

The Conquest Hypothesis

Conquest theories of state origins began to assume a systematic form in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ludwig Gumplowicz and Gustav Ratzenhofer linked the formation of the state and social classes to conflict and the subordination of some groups by others. Franz Oppenheimer presented the classic model in which mobile conquerors cease merely plundering sedentary populations and replace one-time robbery with regular tribute. Over time they create an apparatus of coercion, administration, and a warrior stratum. The division between conquerors and conquered becomes a durable political division.

This model was developed primarily with Eurasian societies in mind, often on the assumption of conflict between mobile pastoralists and sedentary farmers. It cannot be transferred mechanically to Mesoamerica. No pastoral societies there possessed horses,

draft cattle, or camelids. This does not mean, however, that there were no groups that were more mobile, better prepared to conduct raids, or active along the margins of sedentary agricultural zones.

A possible Mesoamerican variant should therefore be formulated more cautiously. A small, mobile group capable of coordinated violence could have attacked a sedentary farming, fishing-and-farming, or estuarine-resource community. Instead of expelling the inhabitants or limiting themselves to plunder, the victors could have established lasting sovereignty over the settlement and its territory. They did not have to deprive families of their houses, tools, or rights to use fields. It was sufficient to acquire an enforceable right to a share of produce, labor, or other prestations.

The central innovation would therefore not have been the emergence of private landed property in the modern sense, but the political appropriation of territory and the establishment of sovereignty over the people who inhabited it. A local family could continue to cultivate its field, live in its house, own tools, and pass the household to descendants. Its rights, however, would be limited by the superior right of the ruling group to levy prestations.

Two levels of rights would then emerge:

- 1. direct possession and use - the family retains its house, tools, harvest, and right to use the land;**
- 2. political sovereignty - the ruling group acquires the right to demand a share of produce, labor, services, or goods.**

This model explains why we need not find archaeological evidence of the complete dispossession of the subordinated population. A subject need not be a slave or work on a field owned by the ruler. It is enough that the subject lacks a full right to the product of his or her own labor.

Conditions Required by the Conquest Hypothesis

For this hypothesis to be persuasive, it is not enough to state that a mobile group could defeat sedentary inhabitants. The conditions that made it possible to transform victory into durable rule must be specified.

First, the subordinated community had to produce a regular and appropriable product. No single universal threshold - for example, an exact surplus of ten percent - can be identified as automatically sufficient to support an elite. What mattered was not only the quantity of the product but also its regularity, storability, concentration at harvest time, and the cost of seizure and transport. Dispersed, highly perishable, or easily concealed resources are more difficult to tax than crops that can be gathered at a particular place and time.

Second, the cost of leaving the settlement had to be sufficiently high for the conquered. This need not have resulted solely from population density. People could be tied to fields, orchards, houses, productive installations, fishing grounds, water sources, ancestral

graves, or ritual places. Sedentism created an asset that could not be carried away in flight. Conquest became durable when remaining under sovereignty was less costly than abandoning the entire local subsistence system.

Third, the conquerors required an organizational advantage, not merely courage or combat experience. A small group could not indefinitely supervise a larger population through direct violence alone. It needed points of control, the capacity to respond quickly, information about production, and probably local allies. Some local families could be incorporated into the new elite, receive a share of prestations, or act as intermediaries. Conquest could therefore produce not only a simple ethnic division, but also a coalition between conquerors and part of the local population.

Fourth, a single raid had to be transformed into a recurrent system of collection. This required fixing the dates and places of delivery, methods of measuring obligations, and sanctions for refusal. At first, administration need not have been elaborate or literate. It could rely on memory, ritual, public assemblies, and household responsibility. Yet the procedure had to be durable enough that tribute was not merely a newly negotiated act of plunder each time.

Fifth, the elite had to be reproduced biologically and socially. The victorious group had to settle questions of marriage, inheritance, the affiliation of children, and leadership succession. It could preserve separateness, arrange controlled marriages with local families, adopt selected allies, or construct genealogies linking conquerors to local ancestors. Without such a mechanism, the distinction between conquerors and subjects would disappear after several generations.

Sixth, legitimation was necessary. Violence can establish a relationship of subordination, but its continuous use is costly. The new elite therefore had to present its sovereignty as legitimate: through ancestor cults, control of ceremonies, public feasts, distinctive dress, architecture, iconography, or the attribution to the leader of an ability to maintain cosmic order. In this sense, ritual, prestige-goods exchange, and monumental architecture are not rival explanations but possible instruments for consolidating power previously established through violence.

Seventh, the agency of the subordinated population must be considered. Subjects could flee, conceal produce, reduce production, sabotage collection, form alliances, or rebel. The system remained durable only if the elite could restrict these strategies or offer certain benefits in return: protection, dispute resolution, access to ritual, redistribution in times of shortage, or participation in communal projects. This does not imply a voluntary origin of hierarchy. It means only that power once established through violence had to be transformed into an institution capable of everyday operation.

Eighth, short-term crises may have mattered: floods, droughts, changes in river courses, loss of fishing grounds, crop failure, or the breakdown of established exchange networks. A crisis need not itself create hierarchy, but it could open a moment of vulnerability in

which a small militarily organized group gained an advantage over a weakened settlement.

Answering the Principal Objections

Several arguments are commonly raised against the conquest hypothesis: hierarchy is said to have developed gradually; settlement and cultural continuity are visible in many regions; the earliest elites used local traditions; no uniform 'conqueror culture' appears; and increasing political complexity sometimes seems to have preceded clear evidence of territorial warfare.

These arguments are important, but they do not automatically settle the question.

First, apparent gradualism may partly reflect the resolution of archaeological chronology. A political transformation completed within one generation may appear as a phase lasting several decades or even centuries when dating relies on ceramic phases and a limited number of radiocarbon determinations. This does not mean that every case was abrupt, but the impression of gradual change cannot be treated as a direct record of the pace of political transformation.

Second, continuity in pottery, domestic architecture, and subsistence does not exclude a change of elite. A small conquering group could quickly adopt local styles, use the labor of local craftspeople, and employ existing ritual traditions. If most of the population remained in place, the dominant pattern of material culture would still be local. The absence of complete population replacement is therefore not equivalent to the absence of conquest.

Third, the use of local symbols by an elite is consistent with the logic of legitimation. Conquerors seeking to preserve their power had reason to present themselves not as foreign destroyers but as rightful guardians of local ancestors, gods, and rituals.

Fourth, one should not expect a single, uniform conqueror culture across Mesoamerica. The hypothesis would imply multiple local conquests by different groups, not one migration wave. Each case could leave different traces.

On the other hand, the conquest hypothesis cannot be insulated from falsification by constant appeals to traces that 'may have disappeared.' If it is to be a scientific hypothesis, it must generate predictions that distinguish it from competing models.

Archaeological Predictions

In regions where durable hierarchy arose through conquest, one should seek the convergence of several categories of evidence:

- abrupt changes in settlement patterns, the abandonment of some settlements, population concentration, or relocation to more defensible places;

- evidence of destruction, fire, fortifications, weapons, and skeletal trauma, while recognizing that the absence of any single category of evidence should not be decisive;
- the appearance of individuals of nonlocal origin in the earliest elite burials, potentially identifiable through isotopic analysis and, where preservation permits, genetic data;
- a contrast between the biological and material continuity of most of the population and the greater mobility or distinctiveness of a small group buried in privileged contexts;
- the rapid establishment of exclusive elite access to particular places, goods, rituals, or architectural forms without an earlier broad polarization of wealth among households;
- the emergence of product-collection points, storage facilities, places for the public delivery of prestations, or standardized containers and measures that might indicate regular collection;
- iconography of victory, captives, subordination, distinctive headdresses, lineage emblems, or genealogies used to distinguish the ruling group from its subjects;
- the persistence of local everyday culture alongside the appearance of a qualitatively new organization of central space and access to resources.

None of these indicators alone demonstrates conquest. What would matter is their convergence and proper temporal sequence. It would be especially important to determine whether evidence of violence and population influx preceded the first durable signs of hereditary hierarchy or appeared only in a society that was already hierarchical.

Conquest, Hierarchy, and the State

The proposed mechanism can be represented as follows:

conquest -> political appropriation of territory -> establishment of a right to prestations -> division between ruling and subordinated groups -> organization of collection and coercion -> hereditary transmission of sovereignty.

In a broader perspective:

a society without a durable relationship of class subordination -> conquest -> a qualitatively new political order.

In this model, political inequality need not grow gradually out of differences in wealth, trade, specialization, or prestige. It can be established through the relationship between victor and subject. One group retains a right to the product of its own labor; the other acquires, in addition, a right to part of the product of the first group's labor.

Political and normative differentiation then arises even in the absence of written law. Some become producers obligated to render prestations; others become controllers of part of their labor. The elite's first form of 'property' need not be land. It may instead be sovereignty over the people inhabiting a particular territory.

If the state is defined minimally as a durable territorial organization that distinguishes a ruling group from the subordinated, establishes regular prestations, and possesses means

of enforcing them, conquest, the formation of hierarchy, and the beginning of statehood may form parts of a single process. This does not mean that all features of a mature state appear at the moment of conquest: an elaborate administration, a multilevel settlement hierarchy, territorial offices, and full specialization of the apparatus of rule may develop later.

This distinction strengthens the hypothesis. It allows one to maintain that political inequality was established abruptly without requiring every early community with a hereditary elite to be called a fully developed state. In archaeological literature, the earliest well-documented Mesoamerican state is usually associated only with the later development of Monte Alban, whereas earlier centers are more often described as ranked societies, chiefdoms, or complex polities.

Conquest by a Neighboring Sedentary Society

Among scholars of Mesoamerica, greater importance is generally assigned to conquests undertaken by neighboring sedentary societies than to the conquest of farmers by an external hunting-and-gathering group. In my view, this phenomenon became crucial later, when hierarchical centers had grown enough to compete for control over other settlements and valleys.

This applies especially to competition in the Valley of Oaxaca, the expansion of Monte Alban, the formation of the Zapotec state, and the subordination of neighboring regions. In this case, however, the organizations at war already possessed hierarchy, leadership, and the capacity to mobilize larger numbers of people. This therefore represents a later stage of change: warfare among hierarchical societies, not necessarily the mechanism through which the first hierarchy arose.

Conclusion

The conquest hypothesis has not been conclusively confirmed for the Early Formative period. Its weakness remains the absence of unambiguous bodies of evidence showing the arrival of an external conquering group at precisely the moment when the first durable hierarchies were established. It should not, however, be rejected solely because we do not observe complete population replacement, an abrupt change in pottery, or a uniform 'conqueror culture.' A small elite could leave a limited trace, rapidly adopt local patterns, and rule a population that retained its existing material culture.

The principal strength of the hypothesis is that it identifies a concrete mechanism by which difference among people could be transformed into a durable, hereditary right to the labor of others. Models based on prestige, trade, ritual, demography, and management often describe the conditions, means of legitimation, or consequences of hierarchy well, but they do not always explain the moment at which an asymmetrical political right was established.

For the conquest model to compete with these hypotheses, however, it must be formulated regionally and subjected to testing. A general analogy with Eurasia, or an assumption that every hierarchy must have originated in invasion, is insufficient. The temporal sequence linking violence, the influx or differentiation of a ruling group, the creation of a system of prestations, and the consolidation of hereditary power must be demonstrated. Only then will the conquest hypothesis become not merely a logically possible scenario but an actual explanation of a specific historical process.

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