

*Negotiating Political
Authority and Community
in Terminal Formative
Coastal Oaxaca*

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Mesoamerican archaeologists have traditionally viewed complex polities as highly integrated with well-developed hierarchies led by powerful rulers (e.g., Charlton and Nichols 1997; Flannery 1972; Lucero 2006:155–62; Marcus 1998:63–73; Martin and Grube 2000; Spencer and Redmond 2001). Over the past twenty-five years, however, archaeologists have begun to challenge these assumptions by considering a range of forms of political authority (e.g., Beckman 2008, this volume; Blanton et al. 1996; Blanton and Fargher 2008; Fargher et al. 2010) along with exploring the ways in which social processes within polities complicate and limit integration (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Brumfiel 1992; Joyce 2010; Joyce et al. 2001; Robin 2002; Yáeger 2003). Archaeologists are increasingly viewing complex polities as the result of dynamic and ongoing negotiations among people across salient lines of social difference—elite and nonelite, urban and rural, center and periphery (Ashmore et al. 2004; Barber and Joyce 2007; Beckman, this volume; Gonlin and Lohse 2007; Inomata, this volume; Joyce 2009, 2013a). The resulting perspective creates a more dynamic and contingent understanding of the history of complex societies in Mesoamerica and beyond.

In this chapter, we build on more than a decade of research concerning the negotiation of political authority in complex societies (Barber 2005, 2013; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2000, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2013a; Joyce et al. 2001) to examine initial political centralization

during the Terminal Formative Period (150 BCE–250 CE) in the lower Río Verde Valley on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca (figure 3.1). Based on excavations at the early urban center of Río Viejo, along with regional survey and excavations at several outlying sites, we examine the historical context for early political centralization. Rather than focusing on the emergence of a polity whose ruling ideas, practices, and institutions came to be established and have a degree of historical durability, Terminal Formative Río Viejo allows us to explore an instance where hierarchy and regional rulership were tenuous and short-lived. Río Viejo therefore provides insights into the kinds of tensions, contradictions, and conflicts that must be negotiated and worked out for regional political authority to become institutionalized.

We argue that incipient regional political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley was the outcome of negotiations among the diverse social groups that inhabited the region. These negotiations involved political and religious practices, ideas, and materials focused on the civic-ceremonial center of Río Viejo, located on the site's massive acropolis. By the late Terminal Formative (100–250 CE), the acropolis became a regionally significant place that embodied the history of the many communities in the valley that participated in its construction and use, thereby facilitating a process through which the kinds of acts that had for generations defined local places and social groups came to define a polity (Barber and Joyce 2007). We argue, however, that the diverse entanglements centered on the acropolis were insufficiently differentiated from practices, places, people, objects, and beliefs that defined local communities and more traditional, corporate, and egalitarian forms of leadership. We contrast Terminal Formative Río Viejo with the early history of the Monte Albán polity, which persisted in one form or another for over a millennium (Blanton 1978; Joyce 2010). This comparison leads us to conclude that perhaps the most significant reason why the Río Viejo polity collapsed after only a handful of generations was the inability of regional elites to become focal nodes in the kinds of complex and far-reaching networks of ritual, politics, and economy that led to more cohesive, integrated, and long-lived polities in other parts of Mesoamerica, such as at Monte Albán.

THE LATE FORMATIVE ROOTS OF THE RÍO VIEJO POLITY

Archaeological research over the past twenty-five years on the Formative Period in the lower Río Verde Valley has provided a detailed, diachronic database that forms the basis of this chapter (Barber 2005, 2013; Barber and Joyce 2007, 2011, 2012; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 2008, 2010, 2013a; Joyce and Barber 2011, n.d.; Joyce and Levine 2009; Joyce and Winter 1989; Joyce et al. 1998;

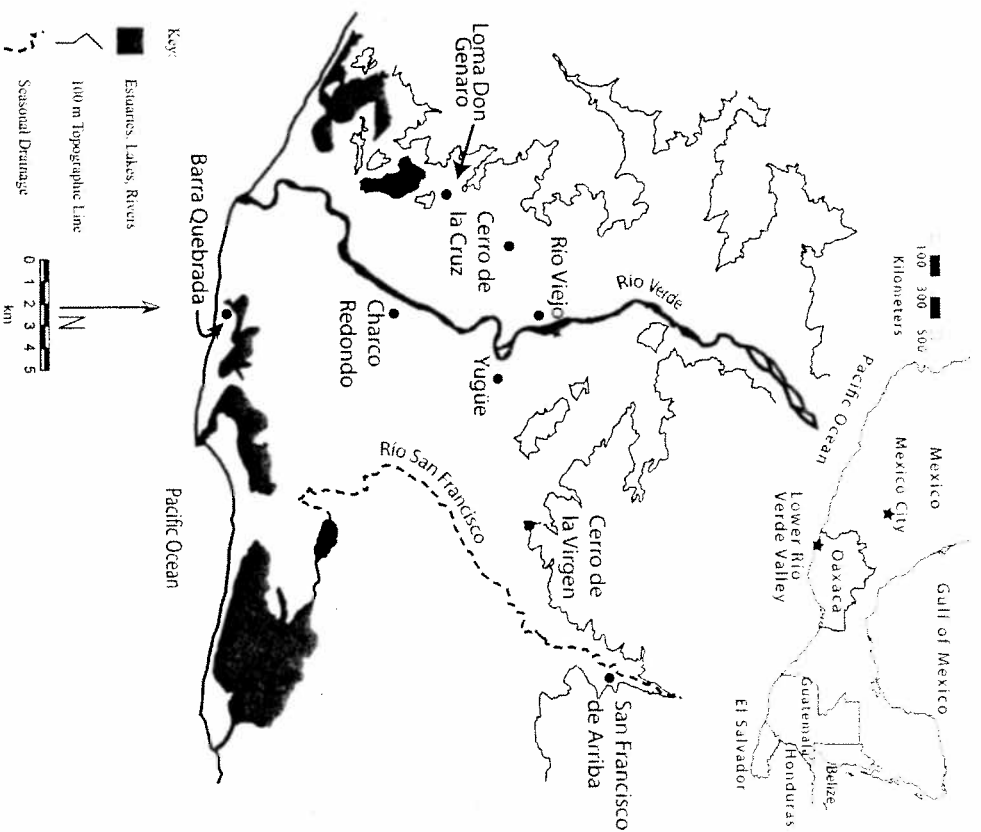


Figure 3.1. Map of the lower Río Verde, showing archaeological sites mentioned in the text (drawn by Sarah Barber).

Levine 2002, 2013; Workinger 2002). Archaeological research has included excavation at the Terminal Formative political seat of Río Viejo and lower-order sites such as Cerro de la Cruz, Cerro de la Virgen, San Francisco de Arriba, Yugué, Charco Redondo, Loma Don Genaro, and Barra Quebrada. Over the past five years, our research has focused on large-scale excavations

on the acropolis of Río Viejo (Barber and Joyce 2011, 2012; Barber et al. 2013a; Joyce and Barber 2011, n.d.). A full-coverage regional survey carried out over 164 square kilometers has yielded data on changes in settlement patterns and social organization (Hedgepeth and Koukopoulos 2012; Joyce et al. 2001). Finally, paleoenvironmental research has provided data on changes in floodplain and coastal environments that inform the history of human resource use (Goman et al. 2005, 2010, 2013; Joyce and Goman 2012; Mueller et al. 2013).

The archaeological evidence shows that trends toward population growth and increasing social complexity that culminated with the Terminal Formative Río Viejo polity can be traced back to the Middle Formative. During the latter part of the Middle Formative a regional demographic center emerged at Charco Redondo, which grew to 62 hectares. Current evidence is insufficient to determine whether the site was a political center or to assess the nature of social inequality in the region at this time. Population as measured by the occupational area in the full-coverage survey increased from 64 hectares in the late Middle Formative (700–400 BCE) to 344 hectares by the Late Formative (400–150 BCE) (Hedgepeth and Koukopoulos 2012). Evidence from sediment cores suggests that environmental changes, including the expansion of the lower Verde's floodplain and the creation of coastal estuaries, contributed to population growth during the latter part of the Formative (Goman et al. 2005, 2013; Mueller et al. 2013).

Two demographic centers developed during the Late Formative on the east side of the river: Charco Redondo at 70 hectares and San Francisco de Arriba at 95 hectares (Workinger 2002). Monumental construction occurred at both sites (Butler 2011; Workinger 2002), although evidence for social inequality is limited (Joyce 1991a, 1994, 2010:180–86). Most inhabitants of the valley lived in small sites where communal practices like ritual feasting, cemetery burial, and collective labor projects defined local groups consisting of multiple households and perhaps entire communities (Barber 2005:95–101; Barber and Joyce 2007; Barber et al. 2013b; Joyce 1991a, 1994; 2005, 2010:180–86; Joyce et al. 1998). At the 1.5-hectare site of Cerro de la Cruz, for example, horizontal excavations exposed a communal cemetery in a modest public building on the site's upper terrace (Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1994). The remains of forty-nine individuals were recovered from the cemetery. Most of the burials (86 percent) were adults, and none were accompanied by offerings. Adjacent to the public buildings, excavations revealed a granite flagstone patio. Three small storerooms were discovered on the west side of the patio opposite the public building. Within one of the storerooms was a thin organic deposit containing over 1,000 fragments of charred maize (Woodard 1991:869). A hearth of 3

square meters, which far exceeds the size of cooking features typically associated with residences, intruded into the surface of the patio. We interpret the hearth, midden, and storerooms as evidence for ritual feasting that brought together multiple households.

The evidence for communal rituals and labor projects and the lack of indications of pronounced inequality therefore suggests that Late Formative authority and identity were defined in terms of horizontal, communal social relationships rather than hierarchical, exclusionary ones (Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2005, 2010). At both large and small sites, people created socially meaningful places through the construction and use of shared public spaces and monumental facilities that embedded collective actions and histories in specific locations on the landscape. The inhabitants of these places, who probably would have included the living, the dead, and other animate entities, engaged in feasting, mortuary ceremonies, other rituals, and communal labor. Late Formative public spaces thus were loci of entanglement where practices, people, and things became intertwined in ways that constituted a particular form of community that included a shared history and identity. As discussed in the next section, the working out of tensions and contradictions between new and preexisting forms of community and authority would be a major site of struggle, negotiation, and contradiction during the Terminal Formative.

COMMUNITY AND AUTHORITY IN THE TERMINAL FORMATIVE

Political complexity culminated during the Terminal Formative with the emergence of an urban center at Río Viejo on the west bank of the river (Joyce 2013b). Río Viejo increased in size from a 25-hectare town in the Late Formative to a 225-hectare urban center by the early Terminal Formative (150 BCE–100 CE). Applying formulae developed elsewhere in Mesoamerica to estimate population from site area (e.g., Blanton 1978:29–30; Kowalewski et al. 2009:24–25; Sanders et al. 1979), we estimate Río Viejo's maximum Terminal Formative population at about 8,500. Regional population grew through this period based on the area occupied in the survey zone, which reached 775 hectares by the late Terminal Formative. Other large sites included Charco Redondo, Cerro de la Virgen, Tututepec, and San Francisco de Arriba, all of which ranged in size from 60 to 72 hectares. Increased inequality is evident in mortuary offerings, domestic architecture, ceremonial caches, and monumental buildings (Barber 2005, 2013; Barber and Olvera 2012; Barber et al. 2009; Joyce 2005, 2006, 2010:186–95, 2013b; Joyce and Barber 2011; Mays and Barber

2008). The evidence from Río Viejo and outlying sites in the region show that during the Terminal Formative, community continued to be constituted through the construction and use of shared public spaces and monumental buildings as they had been in the Late Formative.

COMMUNAL CEREMONY

Communal ceremonies associated with monumental public buildings and spaces continued and expanded in scale from the Late Formative, including mortuary rituals in cemeteries, feasting, and communal caches. At Yügüe, during the early Terminal Formative, people constructed a public building on the site's mixed-use platform (Substructure 1) (Barber 2005:150–206; 2013). Feasting is indicated by a cooking feature just outside the public building that included three large jars, burned on their exterior surfaces; one still contained whole shells of estuarine mussels. An early Terminal Formative midden containing feasting sherds, ash, bone, and estuarine shells resulted from a number of distinct feasting events, while a late Terminal Formative sheet midden was likely deposited as the result of one or a small number of feasts. During the late Terminal Formative, Substructure 1 at Yügüe became the location of a communal cemetery (Barber 2005; Barber et al. 2013b). Unlike the earlier cemetery at Cerro de la Cruz, the one at Yügüe included people of varying status levels and a broader range of ages. Additional evidence for the repetitive use of the public building at Yügüe is in the form of ritual caches. During the early Terminal Formative, a cache of twenty ceramic vessels was placed in the fill of Substructure 1 (Barber 2005:164–65; 2013:173–76), and by the late Terminal Formative, at least fifty cylindrical vessels were cached in the building over an extended period of time (figure 3.2a).

At other sites in the region, public buildings are also associated with evidence of feasting, cemeteries, and caching ceremonies. For example, at Charco Redondo, Butler (2011) excavated part of an early Terminal Formative cemetery located in a probable public building. At San Francisco de Arriba, people left ritual caches in the fill of different building phases of the site's acropolis (Workinger 2002:185–214). One cache, however, was much more impressive than the others, consisting of 356 greenstone beads, 27 rock crystal beads, 109 beads of an unidentified stone, 2 greenstone bird head pendants, 2 rock crystal pendants, fragments of iron ore, 9 locally produced miniature grayware jars, and disarticulated animal bone. Higher proportions of fancy grayware serving vessels in nonelite ceramic inventories suggest an increase in ritual feasting in the region as a whole (Levine 2002, 2013).

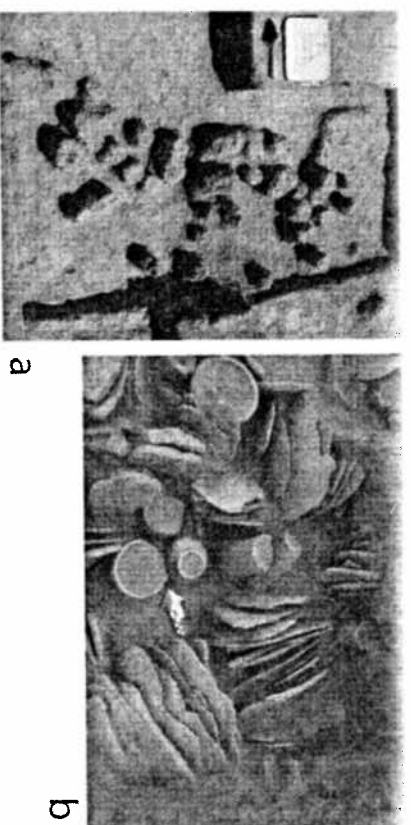


FIGURE 3.2. Terminal Formative Period ritual offerings in public buildings: (a) cache of cylindrical vessels at Yügüe (after Barber 2005; figure 6.12); (b) part of the Complex A offering at Cerro de la Virgen, showing ceramic vessels and vertical stone slabs (courtesy of Jeff Brzezinski).

At Cerro de la Virgen, evidence of both feasting and caching rituals were associated with the ceremonial center located around the site's large public plaza. Along the northeast edge of the plaza, investigations during the 2013 field season recorded an architectural complex (Complex A) consisting of two low platforms built at right angles to one another, with patios to the north and south (Brzezinski n.d.). Dug into the surface of both patios were several hearths, possibly for feasting events; a large hearth far exceeding typical cooking features found in residences was also present in the plaza. Beneath the northern patio of Complex A, excavations exposed an impressive series of caches. The offerings covered an area of 62 square meters and included 260 ceramic vessels placed in granite-slab compartments (figure 3.2b). The stratigraphy and position of the caches and slabs indicate that they consisted of numerous individual offerings emplaced over an extended period of time.

COMMUNAL LABOR PROJECTS

Major communal works projects during the Terminal Formative included the construction of monumental buildings at Río Viejo and at least nine other sites, including Charco Redondo, San Francisco de Arriba, Cerro de la Virgen, and Yügüe (Barber 2005:117–18; Butler 2011; Joyce 2006, 2010:187–91; Joyce et al. 2013; Workinger 2002:147–230). The scale of construction was considerable,

even at some smaller settlements. For example, at the 10-hectare site of Yügüé, on the east side of the river a multise platform was built that measured 300 meters by 150 meters and reached 10 meters at its highest point. The summit of the structure supported public ceremonial space while the flanks supported residences (Barber 2005). At the 60-hectare hilltop site of Cerro de la Virgen, northeast of Yügüé, monumental constructions included a ceremonial precinct that contained a public plaza measuring approximately 2,800 square meters surrounded by a ballcourt and several public buildings (Barber 2005:138–40).

The largest Terminal Formative Period public buildings in the Lower Rio Verde Valley were located at Rio Viejo. The ceremonial core of the site consisted of two monumental earthen architectural complexes. The earlier was Mound 9-Structure 4, which was probably begun at the very end of the Late Formative and then raised incrementally through subsequent building episodes during the early Terminal Formative (Joyce 1991a:364–74). Structure 4 consisted of a massive rectangular platform, measuring 125 meters by 200 meters and at least 5 meters high, raised over the site's Late Formative residential areas (A. Joyce 1999). The platform supported four substructures, one of which today rises 12 meters above the floodplain.

Toward the end of the early Terminal Formative, the ceremonial center was shifted approximately 600 meters to the west of Mound 9-Structure 4. The new ceremonial center was an even larger acropolis that we have designated Mound 1 (Joyce 2006; Joyce and Barber 2011; Joyce et al. 2013). In its final form, the acropolis covered an area of 350 meters by 200 meters and supported two large substructural platforms rising at least 17 meters above the floodplain, a sunken patio, and a plaza (figure 3.3). The acropolis was begun late in the early Terminal Formative, but a major occupation is not evident until the late Terminal Formative. At this time, the Mound 1 acropolis consisted of a platform rising at least 6 meters above the floodplain and supporting two large substructures on its northwestern and eastern sides (Structures 1 and 2, respectively) both of which stood at least 16 meters high. South of Structures 1 and 2 was a large open space located beneath the area that would become the sunken patio in the Late Classic. Excavations suggest that during the late Terminal Formative this space was at the level of the floodplain (Joyce and Barber 2011). The use of this space cannot be determined because Formative Period occupational surfaces are now below groundwater, but we suspect that it was a large public plaza. The possible plaza was bounded to the south and west by a 5- to 7-meter-high platform or platforms that may have been continuous with the main part of the acropolis.¹ Our estimated total volume for Mound 1 is 560,050 cubic meters, which is about half the volume of the Sun

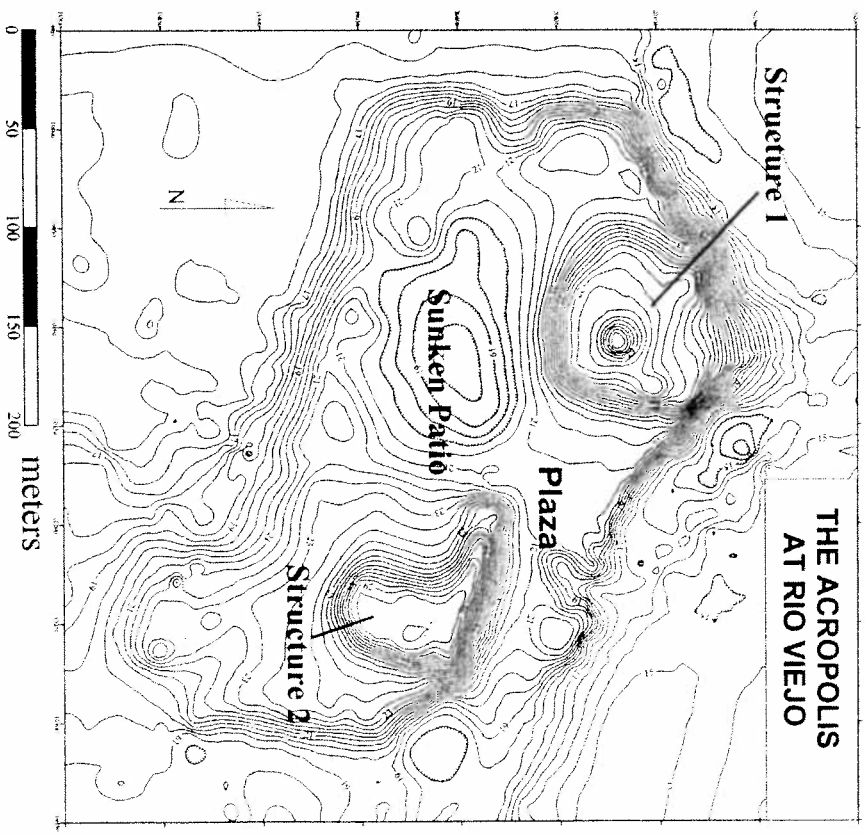


Figure 3.3. Plan of the acropolis at Rio Viejo (after Joyce 2005:figure 6).

Pyramid at Teotihuacan, or slightly smaller than Monk's Mound at Cahokia (Joyce et al. 2013:table 5.1). Our conservative estimate of the volume of the Terminal Formative version of the acropolis is 455,050 square meters.

Evidence that construction of the acropolis required the mobilization of a large labor force from multiple communities comes from excavations in the platform fill and retaining walls on the acropolis (Joyce et al. 2013). The stratigraphy exposed by the excavations indicates that the acropolis was raised by a small number of massive fill deposits, likely emplaced over a relatively short period of time rather than being the result of frequent but smaller scale construction episodes involving numerous superimposed periods of building

remodeling, such as observed with the acropolis at San Francisco de Arriba (Workinger 2002:147–222), Substructure 1 at Yügüé (Barber 2005:150–94), and Mound 9-Structure 4 at Río Viejo (Joyce 1991a; Salazar Chávez et al. n.d.). Although the initial fill layers in the acropolis consisted of unconsolidated sediment, the majority of the fill revealed unexpectedly diverse and labor-intensive construction techniques. We have identified at least five distinct forms of fill, including unconsolidated basket loads of sediment, rammed earth, puddled adobe, and two types of fill utilizing adobe blocks (for more detailed discussions, see Joyce and Barber 2011; Joyce et al. 2013). We use the term *structured-fill* to describe adobe and rammed-earth deposits, since they would have required greater organization and labor to construct in comparison with basket loads of unconsolidated sediment or rubble. The variability in fill construction is mirrored in more formal architectural features, especially retaining walls, which include adobe bricks and stone masonry (see Barber and Joyce 2011, 2012; Frederick n.d.; Joyce and Barber 2011, 2013, n.d.; Joyce et al. 2013; Joyce and Levine 2009). Even within individual walls we see considerable variability in construction techniques. For example, an adobe retaining wall exposed on the western end of the acropolis contained bricks made from three different clay sources that varied in shape and size and were emplaced both horizontally and vertically (Egan 2012:367) (figure 3.4).

We have found no architectural explanation for the different construction techniques on the acropolis. Instead, the variability in construction fill and retaining walls suggests to us that at least five distinct work groups were involved in building the acropolis (e.g., Hastings and Moseley 1975). We hypothesize that each group used slightly different materials and strategies to create the stable interior fill of the structure (i.e., basket loads of unconsolidated fill plus the four types of structured fill). The construction techniques also indicate that the acropolis was not built by a permanent work force, since we would expect to see greater consistency in construction methods, but was the result of a rotation of work groups carrying out their jobs in slightly different ways. Based on estimates of the labor needed to construct the acropolis, we have argued that workers must have been drawn from both Río Viejo and the surrounding settlements who were fulfilling obligations to the community and the nobility at Río Viejo (Joyce et al. 2013). We have also tentatively linked some of the specific construction techniques to earlier buildings at Río Viejo and to buildings at other sites. For example, early Terminal Formative construction fill on Mound 9-Structure 4 at Río Viejo included a rammed earth wall that retained unconsolidated fill (Salazar Chávez et al. n.d.). In contrast, at the site of Loma Don Genaro, located about 6 kilometers southwest

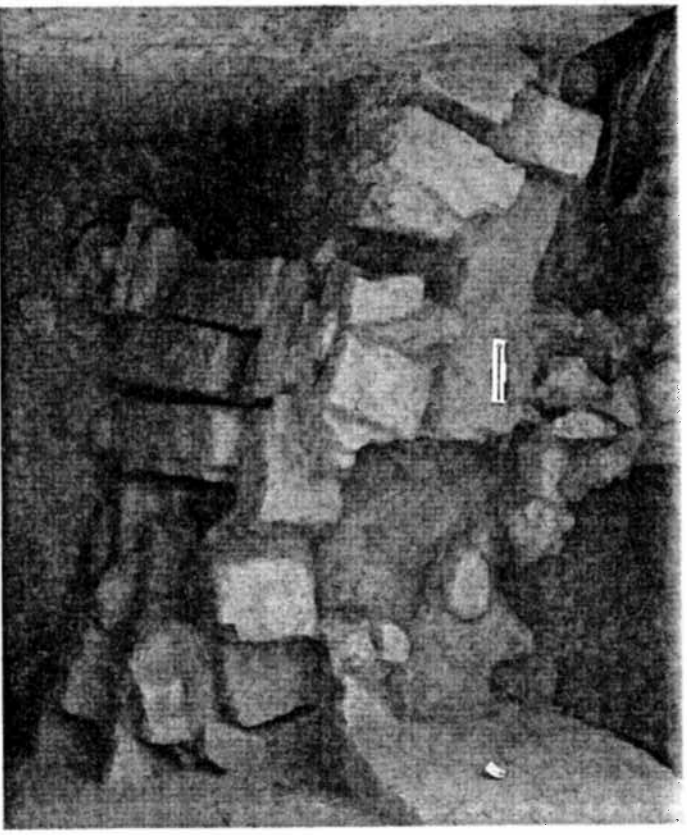


FIGURE 3.4. Adobe retaining wall on the western end of the acropolis with bricks made from three different clay sources (photo by Sarah Barber).

of Río Viejo, we have documented unconsolidated fill and puddled adobe construction techniques dating to the late Terminal Formative (Lucido et al. n.d.). At Yügüé, Barber (2005) noted unconsolidated fill and stone and adobe walls in Terminal Formative architecture.

We argue that the diversity of construction techniques found in the acropolis, which exceeds that of other sites, resulted from a labor pool drawn from multiple communities. Participation of people in the construction of the acropolis, as well as the rituals carried out there, would have acted as practices that affiliated people with the symbols, institutions, and rulers at Río Viejo. It is not clear, however, if people from the entire region were engaged physically and symbolically in practices of affiliation centered on Río Viejo and its politico-religious institutions and authorities. Although regional data indicate that social inequality increased during the Terminal Formative, evidence pertaining to the rulers of Río Viejo has remained illusory.

HIERARCHY AND AUTHORITY

Excavations throughout the lower Verde region indicate that inequality and the power of local leaders increased during the Terminal Formative. At Cerro de la Virgen, Barber (2005, 2013) excavated a high-status house, which was considerably larger and architecturally more elaborate than typical residences in the region. The house was located on a large terrace near the summit of the hill directly above the public plaza. Structure 1, and Complex A, suggesting an association between elites and public space. The scale of Terminal Formative monumental buildings also suggests that rulers had considerable power to mobilize labor (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2013b; Joyce and Barber 2011; Joyce et al. 2013).

Mortuary evidence suggests rising inequality as well. While most people interred in the Yügüe cemetery did not have offerings or were accompanied by a few ceramic vessels or beads made of greenstone or shell, some burials were marked by exotic offerings or adornments. For example, an adult female (Burial 8-Individual 8) showed evidence for pyrite incrustations in her upper incisors. Although dental modification was not necessarily an indicator of high status in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica (Krejci and Culbert 1995), iron pyrite is sufficiently rare in the lower Verde that it was likely a socially valued material. A juvenile (Burial 11-Individual 12) was buried with a string of 36 greenstone and white stone or shell beads as well as a greenstone pendant carved in the shape of a human face. The most elaborate burial (Burial 14-Individual 16) in the cemetery was an adolescent male who was interred wearing a plaster-backed iron ore pectoral and holding an incised flute made from a deer femur (Barber 2005; Barber and Olvera 2012; Mayes and Barber 2008). Based on analyses of the iconography on the flute, Barber and Olvera (2012) argue that this individual was likely a local elite and a ritual specialist with the ability to contact important nonhuman beings such as divinities and ancestors.

Evidence that elites had specialized ritual roles and knowledge also comes from ritual caches in more restricted and exclusive public buildings. For example, an unusual offering was recovered beneath the center of Structure 1 at Cerro de la Virgen, a small public building reached by a stairway ascending from Complex A. The cache was emplaced on bedrock just prior to the construction of Structure 1 and consisted of several ceramic vessels, a small stone figure, 2 miniature stone thrones, fragments of a stone mask, and a nearly complete stone mask depicting a rain deity or rain deity impersonator that was broken prior to deposition (figure 3.5). Another unusual offering associated with a restricted ceremonial building comes from a subfloor cache in a small public platform at Yügüe (Substructure 2). The cache consisted of a



FIGURE 3.5. Offering in Structure 1 from Cerro de la Virgen with stone rain deity mask (courtesy of Jeff Brzezinski).

coarse brownware cooking jar, grayware sherds, including one from a Valley of Oaxaca import, half of an incised local grayware bowl, ash, estuarine shell, fragments of 16 different ceramic earpools, a ceramic figurine, and burned earth. The incised design on the grayware bowl included an anthropomorphic image depicting a regional variant of the Zapotec *xitani* or the Mixtec *yuhui* (Brzezinski 2011:107–9), a high-status sacrificial specialist who wears a mask with a long, upturned snout (Urcid 2005:56). The inclusion of the earpools indicates an association with elite status (R. Joyce 1999).

Although excavation data from outlying sites demonstrate inequality in the Terminal Formative Period, evidence for the nature of rulership and political authority at Río Viejo has proved difficult to come by, even from the extensive excavations on the acropolis. We have found no domestic architecture that might indicate the location of a noble residence or ruler's palace. There is no evidence for tombs or elaborate burials of nobility. We have yet to find stone monuments with portraits of rulers that date to the Terminal Formative, as have been recorded in many other regions of Mesoamerica (Joyce 2010; Love 1999; Pool 2007). We have investigated at least one elaborate and spatially restricted ceremonial space on the acropolis that indicates a degree of

exclusivity that presumably marked status distinctions. Structure 2 was a large, stepped platform that supported an adobe superstructure that had remnants of the only architectural stucco ever found in the valley and a massive stone retaining wall that would have supported a narrow elevated platform (Joyce 2006; Joyce et al. 2013). The absence of domestic artifacts or refuse in association with Structure 2 indicates that it was a public building, possibly a temple. Yet there are fewer direct indications of elites on the acropolis than at many of the public buildings we have excavated elsewhere in the region. Instead, we see evidence for regional political authority in the distribution of the population, in the coordination required to underwrite monument construction, and in the sponsorship of large-scale ritual feasts and presumably other rituals on the acropolis. As discussed in the next section, the evidence suggests to us that regional authority and political identity were both tenuous and contradictory to local authority and community identity.

THE RIO VIEJO POLITY: CONTRADICTION, NEGOTIATION, AND COLLAPSE

We see the construction and use of the acropolis at Río Viejo during the late Terminal Formative as key processes in the constitution of regional political identity and authority. The relocation of Río Viejo's site center from Mound 9-Structure 4 to the acropolis would have detached the new ceremonial center from the long-standing material, symbolic, and practical focus of Río Viejo's local community. Limited excavations in Mound 9-Structure 4 suggest that it was not used during the late Terminal Formative (Joyce 1991a; Salazar Chávez et al. n.d.). By purging the ceremonial center of its exclusively local entanglements, the acropolis created the potential for the construction of a regionally significant place that could have become a material and ideational focal point in a multi-community polity. Our data suggest, however, that the scaling-up of communal practices and the emergence of incipient forms of regional authority created points of contradiction and tension relative to long-standing communal practices and forms of authority at the local level (Barber 2013; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2008, 2010:194–96, 2013b; Joyce et al. 2013). The polity that resulted was tenuous, contested, and short lived.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LOCAL COMMUNITY AND POLITY

The construction of the acropolis was a massive communal project that drew on labor from multiple communities in the valley. Yet there is only limited

evidence for practices that would have continued to draw large numbers of people to Río Viejo after the acropolis was built. The best documented practice was ritual feasting, the evidence for which is abundant across the acropolis. Feasting-related features demonstrate that both food preparation and discard took place at much larger scales than has been found at outlying communities (Lucido et al. 2013). Ten refuse deposits were recovered on the south and west sides of the acropolis. Nine of these deposits were located in pits that had been excavated into Terminal Formative construction fill. The two largest pits were more than 1.5 meters deep and one was more than 4 meters in diameter. These features spanned the entire period from the completion of the acropolis, probably early in the second century CE, to the time of the area's abandonment at ca. 250 CE. The middens contained ash, thick lenses of estuarine mussel shell, dense deposits of sherds, and organic sediments. Five of these features were internally stratified, demonstrating that they were formed by multiple depositional events. The lack of domestic architecture and other features and artifacts normally associated with residences (e.g., Barber 2005; Gaxiola 1984; Joyce et al. 1998; Robles García 1988; Winter 1986) on the acropolis indicates that the middens were formed as the result of nondomestic commensal activities. The size and number of most of these features is well beyond that of a domestic refuse deposit. At least some of the food consumed at feasts was probably prepared in a huge earth oven discovered at the base of Structure 2 on the acropolis (Barber et al. 2013a; Joyce and Barber 2013). Refuse from the oven consisted of ash, burned sherds, and burned rock that covered an area with a diameter of at least 10 meters (figure 3.6). The burned rock and sherds were used to retain heat. Despite the oven's large size, it is unlikely that it was sufficient to cook all foods used in feasting, and the absence of storage facilities on the acropolis indicates that people attending feasts brought food there.

The size and contents of the middens suggests that both large-scale and repeated food consumption was taking place on the acropolis (Lucido et al. 2013). The evidence available thus far does not indicate that feasting on the acropolis was restricted to the elite. The scale and distribution of commensal activities makes restricted feasting seem unlikely to us. The ceramics themselves do not include unusual decorations, surface treatments, or vessel forms that might indicate elite wares of restricted circulation (cf. Elson and Sherman 2007; LeCount 2001). These data indicate that large groups of people were brought together not only in the construction of Río Viejo's monumental spaces but also in their subsequent use. The feasting activities can be considered a scaled-up version of practices that had brought together people in ritually charged ways at other public buildings in the region and a means through which new

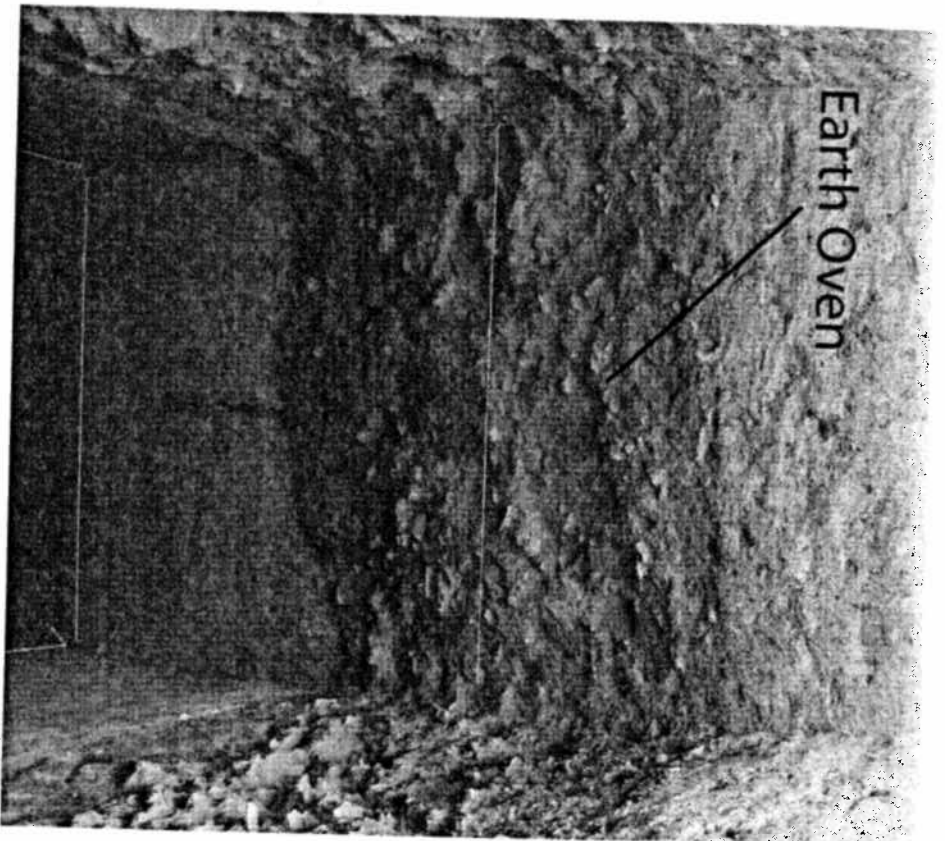


FIGURE 3-6. Photo of a section of the earth oven on the acropolis at Rio Viejo (photo by Arthur Joyce).

social ties were forged (cf. Monaghan 1995). Yet ritual feasting would have also drawn people away from ritual activities at public buildings in their home communities, which clearly continued as an important focus of ritual action at this time (Barber 2005; Levine 2002). The increase in obligations of feast sponsors at both the local and regional level could have taxed people's abilities to generate surpluses and led to social tensions and conflicts, just as feasting can do in modern Mixtec communities in Oaxaca (Monaghan 1995:167–89).

Despite the scale of communal construction and feasting on the acropolis, evidence from outlying communities suggests that practices of affiliation at the regional level did not result in an overarching political identity centered on Rio Viejo and its rulers. In fact, the regional evidence suggests that practices of affiliation and community identity did not extend much beyond local communities. For example, site orientations, including those of public buildings, varied from site to site (Barber 2005:210–11). Construction techniques of monumental architecture also varied from community to community, with both rubble fill and unconsolidated sediment used at San Francisco de Arriba (Workinger 2002) and Cerro de la Virgen (Barber 2005) and various forms of earthen architecture dominant at other sites, including Cerro de la Cruz, Yügüé, Loma Don Genaro, Barra Quebrada, and Rio Viejo (Barber 2005; Joyce 1991a; Joyce and Barber 2011; Joyce et al. 2013; Lucido et al. n.d.; Winter and Joyce 1987). Data from ceremonial caches at Yügüé, San Francisco de Arriba, Cerro de la Virgen, and Loma Don Genaro suggest a pattern of regional idiosyncrasy in the use of public buildings (Barber 2005, 2013; Barber et al. 2014; Brzezinski n.d.; Lucido et al. n.d.; Workinger 2002). The contents and positioning of caches, for instance, was quite variable across the valley. The San Francisco de Arriba cache, which included crystal and greenstone artifacts, contained a number of valuable imported items as well as a wide range of raw materials. At Cerro de la Virgen, the Complex A cache consisted almost entirely of cylindrical ceramic vessels, some of which are similar to those found at San Francisco de Arriba. However, the Cerro de la Virgen vessels were deposited without associated valuables and within granite slab compartments—a formation seen nowhere else in the region. Exotic stone objects were found in Structure 1 at the site, including the stone mask and thrones, but were quite distinct from those deposited at San Francisco de Arriba. Caches at Yügüé, on the other hand, did not contain valuable items. In fact, the two largest caches at the site contained dozens of crudely made ceramic cylinders that look as if they may have been amateur copies of the cylindrical offering vessels found at San Francisco de Arriba and Cerro de la Virgen (Barber et al. 2014). The evidence therefore suggests that, while there was a regionally shared set of ideas regarding how communities were defined, there were clear distinctions among sites in the materials and practices through which specific community identities were instantiated. Contrary to the expectations of many models of early complex societies (e.g., Flannery 1998; Redmond and Spencer 2008), the construction and use of the acropolis at Rio Viejo does not seem to have led to uniformity in religious practices and architectural canons across the region.



FIGURE 3-7. Late Terminal Formative iconographic gray wares: (a) conical bowl from Yugüe with incised maize icon (after Brzezinski 2011:figure 10a); (b) conical bowl from Cerro de la Cruz with incised cloud icon (after Brzezinski 2011:figure 15); (c) incurving wall bowl from Yugüe with lightning iconography (after Brzezinski 2011:figure 33a).

sacrifice, in pre-Columbian religion (Brzezinski 2011:105; Hepp and Joyce 2013:277–79). At Yugüe, the imagery on the bone flute from the cemetery and the grayware bowl fragment from the cache in Substructure 2 suggest that elites may have taken on more important roles as religious specialists, as has been seen in other regions of Mesoamerica at this time (Freidel and Schele 1988; Joyce 2000). It is possible that the widely available iconographic ceramics materialized an ideology that legitimated the central role of rulers in religious belief and practice in the lower Río Verde Valley, although there is no evidence suggesting that elites controlled the production or distribution of these vessels. Rather than the results of an ideology imposed on common people by the nobility, the wide distribution of iconographic graywares could be a function of the communal nature of political authority and religious practice.

Overall, the evidence suggests to us that people from different communities in the region participated in the construction and use of the acropolis and rulers of Río Viejo gained some degree of political influence over multiple communities. These multi-community links, however, appear to us to have been tenuous and unstable such that Terminal Formative Río Viejo challenges the limits of what might be defined as a polity. The evidence suggests that authority in the region was not singular, and it is likely that newer, more regional and hierarchical forms of authority existed alongside traditional, community-based and less hierarchical leadership. Points of tension and negotiation probably surrounded issues such as participation in feasts and other rituals on public buildings and the centrality of regional rulers rather than local communities in important ceremonies. We suspect that while Río Viejo was the most powerful political center, people of other communities had considerable independence and were able to strategically strengthen ties with or create distance from rulers and ruling institutions at Río Viejo.

There is also evidence for points of tension surrounding increasing inequality and the emergence of regional political authorities at Río Viejo. Even though local leaders were still tied to their communities, as shown by the excavations at Yugüe, Cerro de la Virgen, and Charco Redondo (Barber 2009, 2013; Barber and Joyce 2007; Barber et al. 2013b; Joyce 2010:18–95), they were also increasingly distinguishing themselves from others through mortuary practices, prestige goods, and elaborate residences. Social valuables obtained through long-distance exchange linked lower Verde elites to those in other parts of Mesoamerica and contributed to the creation of a high-status identity. Although prestige goods may have had complex life histories that included use as adornments and gifts exchanged among prominent people, many were ultimately consumed in burials and caches and so became entangled with the community via collective ceremonies. The interment of socially valued goods in burials and offerings in public buildings contributed to status inequality because these objects demonstrated the unique social ties of their donors. However, the deposition of such materials in nondomestic contexts converted valuable items into collective resources, thereby transforming hierarchical social distinctions into expressions of traditional communal principles. Cached valuables thus became inalienable objects that materialized corporate identities and histories (Barber et al. 2014; see also Weiner 1992). The marking of elite bodies via adornment and prestigious objects, as well as the elaborate architecture and spatial setting of the high-status house at Cerro de la Virgen, demonstrate the increasing visibility of high status at the local level. Their interment in community cemeteries upon death, however, in turn highlighted elites' membership in a local collectivity. Likewise, since evidence for the celebration of rulers and rulership has not been found, it appears that the construction of monumental buildings with voluntary labor emphasized corporate action and identity rather than the authority of rulers. The evidence suggests that rulership and hierarchy were embedded in and constrained by communal principles, practices, and obligations, resulting in a form of political authority that Blanton (1998:151) defines as egalitarian.

The only possible evidence we see for a regional political identity tied to the rulers of Río Viejo is in the form of imagery on widely available grayware vessels. Brzezinski (2011) shows that the most common iconography on Terminal Formative Period grayware bowls (figure 3-7) included images pertaining to widespread Mesoamerican religious themes such as maize, clouds, lightning, wind, and rain (Jansen and Pérez Jiménez 2007; Monaghan 1990; Sellen 2011; Taube 1996). Images of skulls and dead humans, especially on anthropomorphic vessel apliques, also suggest the important role of death, and perhaps

THE COLLAPSE OF RÍO VIEJO

The collapse of the late Terminal Formative polity around 250 CE was followed by a period of political fragmentation in the Early Classic Period (250–500 CE), showing that Terminal Formative authority was indeed tenuous and short lived (Joyce and Barber 2011; Joyce 2005, 2008:234–240). At ca. 250 CE the archaeological record indicates a dramatic change in regional settlement and sociopolitical organization. Río Viejo decreased in size from 200 hectares in the late Terminal Formative to 75 hectares in the Early Classic. Several other large Terminal Formative floodplain sites with mounded architecture, including Yügüé, declined significantly in size or were abandoned. Regional surveys in the lower Río Verde region show a shift to defensible piedmont locations. During the Early Classic, the region contained perhaps as many as eight demographic centers of roughly equivalent size. There is little evidence for monumental building activities, suggesting that leaders were unable to mobilize large labor forces as they did in the Terminal Formative. The data indicate that during the Early Classic, multiple, perhaps competing, polities occupied the lower Río Verde Valley.

As a focus of the tenuous regional entanglements that constituted the Río Viejo polity, it is not surprising that our excavations on the site's acropolis show that it was abandoned at ca. 250 CE. While we are still working to understand this important social and political transition, our excavations on the acropolis suggest that people may have formally dismantled or “closed” this monumental public space as the Formative Period came to an end. Burning of superstructures and platform surfaces is indicated in the ceremonial building atop Structure 2 and in a substantial wattle-and-daub public building on the south edge of the acropolis (Arellano 2012; Joyce et al. 2013; Rivas 2012). In both areas we recovered burned earthen floors, and in one instance we found burned daub detritus from no fewer than three separate superstructures. We cannot rule out the possibility that violence was the cause of this burning and potentially part of the reason Río Viejo collapsed. Evidence from subsequent deposits indicates, however, that the acropolis went through a period of ritual termination, and the final and most extensive episode of burning may have initiated these ceremonies.

At the very end of the late Terminal Formative, immediately following the burning of these buildings, much of the structure was covered by thin fill layers and/or deposits of refuse containing high densities of broken ceramics that resemble the results of termination ceremonies found in other parts of Mesoamerica (Elson and Smith 2001; Hamann 2008; Stanton et al. 2008; Stross 1998; Walker 1998). Most importantly, there were changes in the kinds

of activities taking place on the acropolis at this time. Stones were removed from masonry features and superstructures covered by fill were not rebuilt. At the base of Structure 2, colluvial deposits suggest that the structure was not being maintained and began to erode. In several areas of the acropolis, sherds and partial vessels overlay these fill deposits or were placed into pits that had been excavated into the final layers of earthen fill. These pits varied significantly in size, but their contents were consistently sherds, whole and partial vessels, some of which appeared to have been broken in place; and sand. One pit consisted of sherds and an organic incendiary that were buried *in situ*. The fill deposits that overlay the final Terminal Formative strata throughout the acropolis date to the Late Classic, reiterating that the actions must have been among the very last undertaken on the acropolis until the area was reoccupied around 500 CE.

Activity on the acropolis changed dramatically in the Early Classic Period, during which time there was no construction or modification of monumental spaces. Indeed, some areas may have been mined for sediment to use in construction elsewhere given the presence of large pits that were refilled in the Late Classic Period. During the Late Classic, the acropolis was reoccupied and once again became the focus of important ceremonies (Baillie 2012; Joyce et al. 2001). At this time, Río Viejo reemerged as an urban center and political seat for the region.

We are not entirely sure what led to the collapse of the Río Viejo polity and the ritual termination and abandonment of the acropolis. Although we cannot entirely rule out interaction and perhaps conflict with distant polities such as Teotihuacan (Joyce 2003; cf. Workinger 2013), we increasingly see evidence for the sorts of tensions and contradictions that developed from regional historical processes, such as those surrounding community and authority that we have delineated in this chapter (Joyce 2008, 2010, 2013b; Joyce and Barber 2011). In particular, we see fracture points created by new forms of political authority as well as the more encompassing sets of practices, beliefs, and identities centered on the acropolis at Río Viejo. Contradictions developed during the Terminal Formative between the newer, more hierarchical and regional forms of authority and identity that were beginning to emerge at Río Viejo and long-standing local and communal forms of authority and identity centered on public buildings at places like Yügüé, Cerro de la Virgen, and San Francisco de Arriba. We see contradictions between peoples' obligations to their local communities and to the rulers of Río Viejo. At the same time, Río Viejo's rulers were faced with the conflicting demands of hierarchy and community. To extend their political power, the rulers of Río Viejo needed to set

themselves apart so as to supersede the authority of local leaders and become a focal point of a new scaled-up regional community. Yet they were operating in a cultural setting where authority was tightly constrained by local communal identity and obligations. Similar kinds of contradictions and points of tension existed at this time in other parts of Mesoamerica and were worked through in diverse ways, leading to a variety of forms of political organization and divergent political histories.

INSTITUTIONALIZING REGIONAL AUTHORITY: THE VIEW FROM MONTE ALBÁN

Our archaeological research in the lower Río Verde Valley shows that Río Viejo exhibits many of the hallmarks that archaeologists have traditionally attributed to the kinds of politically centralized and tightly integrated societies normally defined as states. In the case of Río Viejo, these characteristics include a five-tiered settlement hierarchy, urbanism, monumental public architecture, and rulers who were sufficiently powerful to sponsor large labor projects and public ceremonies. Yet a closer reading of the evidence shows that people in outlying communities like Yügüé, Cerro de la Virgen, San Francisco de Arriba, and Loma Don Genaro exhibited considerable independence from the regional center in ritual practices and architectural techniques and styles. In contrast to traditional archaeological models of complex political formations as strongly hierarchical and tightly integrated, our view of the later Formative Río Viejo polity is that it was neither highly integrated nor significantly coercive. While Río Viejo challenges assumptions about complex politics, it was far from being an isolated case. Throughout much of later Formative Mesoamerica, people in complex polities were struggling over competing forms of political authority (e.g., Cowgill 1997; Joyce 2010; Love 1999; Pool 2008; Sugiyama 1993). In some cases, such as at Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, the outcome led to the institutionalization of regional political authority, although the form of that authority varied from region to region. Likewise, while these polities persisted for centuries, their ruling ideas, practices, and institutions were far from stable. In other cases, including Río Viejo and probably many of the polities of the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, regional political authority was tenuous and short lived (Joyce 2010:195).

The later Formative Monte Albán polity in the highlands of Oaxaca offers a comparative case to explore some of the factors that could have contributed to the institutionalization of regional political authority (also see Joyce 2010; Joyce and Barber 2013). We see a number of points of divergence between

Monte Albán and Río Viejo that may have had significant consequences in the history of these polities, especially as they relate to the ability of rulers to extend their authority across multiple communities throughout a broader region. In the Valley of Oaxaca, evidence suggests that the rulers of Monte Albán were initially successful in negotiating shared forms of political control with more traditional communal forms of leadership. Although we see political authority in the Late Formative Valley of Oaxaca as largely communal, Monte Albán's rulers were successful in linking their authority and identity to a series of innovations in politico-religious belief and practice that served to set them apart from local leaders as well as commoners. These innovations included the increasing control over ritual knowledge and authority centered on Monte Albán's Main Plaza as well as the manufacture of social valuables and the use of coercive force.

A focal point in this new relational field was the Main Plaza of Monte Albán, which was a socially significant place marked by architecture and imagery that was clearly distinct from previous ceremonial precincts (e.g., Blanton 1978; Joyce 2000, 2004; Winter 2001). The Main Plaza had been a symbol of collective identity and authority during the Late Formative, but by the Terminal Formative it was increasingly controlled by and restricted to the nobility (Joyce 2004:205–7). Associations of elite residences and burials with religious symbols, spaces, and artifacts, especially the monumental art and architecture found on the Main Plaza, indicate that the nobility increasingly came to control ritual knowledge and authority, although high-ranking commoners may have also achieved positions of political and religious power (Joyce 2010:143; Urcid 2011).

Rulers at Monte Albán were successful in gaining control over the manufacture of a variety of social valuables through which debts and obligations could be established and political institutions funded. These items included fancy creamware ceramics often with post-fire scratch incising and large hollow supports (Elson and Sherman 2007; Kowalewski et al. 1989:180, 199; Markens and Martínez 2009). Like the iconographic graywares in the lower Río Verde Valley, the creamwares often exhibited step-fret designs symbolizing the rain-lightning deity and were part of a pan-Mesoamerican system of elite display. Unlike the lower Verde graywares, the distribution of creamwares in the Valley of Oaxaca was markedly status linked. These symbols may have been another indication of the increasing control of important religious symbols and ceremonies by powerful elites. Excavations in a nonresidential architectural complex on the northwestern corner of the Main Plaza recovered evidence of the production of shell ornaments and prismatic obsidian blades, suggesting that

the rulers of Monte Albán may have also controlled the manufacture of these items (Markens and Martínez 2009).

Finally, the rulers of Monte Albán had recourse to coercive force to bring communities in the valley into compliance. For example, although we question the degree to which areas outside the valley were conquered (e.g., Joyce 2013; Workinger and Joyce 2009; Zeitlin and Joyce 1999), there is evidence that the site of El Palenque, south of Monte Albán, was defeated and incorporated into the Monte Albán polity at ca. 30 BCE (Redmond and Spencer 2006). Warfare included elements of religious ritual through human sacrifice and ritual preparations for battle (Joyce 2000; Urcid 2011; Urcid and Joyce 2014). There are also indications that conflict may have been part of what eventually contributed to the declining influence of communal forms of leadership and the institutionalization of more hierarchical, exclusionary, and regional forms of authority centered at Monte Albán (Joyce 2010:159; Urcid 2011; Urcid and Joyce 2014). Evidence from the end of the Terminal Formative suggests that these tensions may have erupted in a political upheaval at Monte Albán around 200 CE. At this time, several major iconographic programs on the Main Plaza were dismantled and some monuments were defaced and buried under new buildings. A temple on the North Platform was burned and a defensive wall was built around parts of the site. One access point onto the Main Plaza was probably monitored through military force. Since these iconographic programs downplay the power of rulers, and in some cases probably represent communal forms of leadership, their dismantling and destruction may directly reflect the suppression of communal authority that had existed alongside the hierarchical rulers of the polity (Joyce 2010; Urcid 2011; Urcid and Joyce 2014). Evidence for the increasing formalization of status distinctions by the Early Classic Period and iconography celebrating the religious and political power of rulers suggest that the more exclusionary and hierarchical forms of authority gained prominence over competing forms of leadership (Joyce 2004, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

In contrast to Monte Albán, in the lower Río Verde Valley regional political identity and authority were never extended across multiple communities at the end of the Formative Period. Despite the scale of monumental construction at Río Viejo, the regional polity seems to have been weakly integrated and tenuous. There are few indications of innovations in religious, political, and economic practices that would have distinguished rulers from followers and created sources of goods or specialized knowledge not available at the local

level. Instead, what seems to have been new in terms of political relationships was limited to a scaling-up of traditional practices that had previously materialized notions of local community identity, including monumental construction programs and ritual feasting. The active maintenance of strong community identities limited the degree to which the authority of the rulers of Río Viejo could be extended across the region. The Río Viejo polity was never a cohesive political formation and lasted no more than a century or two at most. Because the contradictions and tensions that contributed to the collapse of the Río Viejo polity were never overcome, sites of struggle and negotiation are more accessible to archaeological study. Unlike in the Valley of Oaxaca, victorious regional rulers never suppressed the evidence of competing forms of authority and internal political conflict. Río Viejo therefore has the potential to provide important insights on the kinds of political struggles, negotiations, and conflicts that are inherent to all complex political formations.

We agree with Inomata (this volume) that the negotiation of political authority extends well beyond the strategies that polity rulers take to work out contradictions surrounding inequality and social solidarity as well as those pertaining to the balance between coercion and integration (also see Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2000, 2008, 2010; Joyce et al. 2001; Murakami, this volume; cf. Baron, this volume; Kurnick, this volume). Likewise, we view contradictions that crosscut salient social distinctions involving belief and socioeconomic interest and opportunity as more significant in social negotiations than those faced by polity rulers in political decision-making (see Brumfiel 1996; Giddens 1979; Marx and Engels 1998). We argue that in the lower Río Verde Valley, as in all complex societies, the negotiation of political authority was far more complex than elite power strategies or simple polarities surrounding the interests and agency of elites and commoners (also see Beekman, this volume). For example, we cannot be sure of the reasons for the construction of the acropolis at Río Viejo. Those reasons may have involved some sort of political strategy by rulers or instead might have been motivated by issues related to religion. What is more important and archaeologically accessible, however, is how the ramifying effects of the construction of the acropolis created contradictions and tensions between the newer, more hierarchical and regional forms of authority and identity that were beginning to emerge at Río Viejo and long-standing local and communal forms of authority and identity centered on public buildings at outlying sites. Our research leads us to argue that the negotiation of these contradictions was focused on the centrality of Río Viejo's rulers versus local communities in the construction and ceremonial use of public buildings through which community

was constituted. From this perspective, the most acute tensions may have surrounded contradictions between the interests of Río Viejo's rulers and those of elites at outlying communities as well as between elites and commoners. As early as the Late Formative, if not before, public buildings at outlying sites were loci of entanglement, where ceremonial practices, people, bodies interred in cemeteries, and emplaced offerings became intertwined in ways that constituted a particular form of community that included a shared history and identity. Regardless of what may have motivated the construction of the acropolis at Río Viejo, our evidence shows that such entanglements were never scaled-up to the regional level. Although the rulers of Río Viejo were probably able to mobilize labor from surrounding communities for the construction of the acropolis, in contrast to Monte Albán, these regional political relationships were never institutionalized in ways that contributed to the creation of a polity with a degree of durability. Instead, incipient regional authority was tightly constrained by local communal identity and obligations. The working out of these contradictions and tensions contributed to the abandonment of the acropolis and the decline of Río Viejo in size and regional prominence.

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NOTE

1. Excavations in six different locations along the southern and western edges of the acropolis have failed to find evidence of separate Terminal Formative buildings.

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4

Conflicting Political Strategies in Late Formative to Early Classic Central Jalisco

CHRISTOPHER S. BEEKMAN

The archaeology of the Tequila valleys of central Jalisco (figure 4.1) is ripe for a shift in perspective, after five decades of approaches that either eschewed political organization altogether or relied on older political economic models that associated power with the monopolization of resources. The editors of this volume instead ask us to consider the evidence for political strategies that contradict one another and are not resolved (Fogelin 2011)—political strategies whose contradictions presented opportunities for the powerful to negotiate the authority to rule and allowed followers to rationalize their decision to follow. After considering past research into political strategies in western Mexico, I discuss recent analyses that associate different types of formal built space in the Tequila valleys with conflicting political strategies by virtue of their spatial characteristics as well as iconographic and archaeological evidence. Despite their strategic associations, the architectural forms share close proximity, even physical integration, that suggest that the same elites were practicing both strategies at different times. I follow this with a consideration of ethnographic data that help to elucidate how the balance between these conflicting strategies may have changed over time. I round this out with a discussion of the major foci for conflict and how both elites and nonelites could have navigated these issues.

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