

West Mexico in the Formative and Classic Periods:

Core-Periphery Differentiation or Domination?

By

Christopher S. Beekman

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Introduction

In West Mexico, studies of social ranking and political complexity have tended to focus on the Shaft Tomb mortuary ritual and the surface architecture of the Teuchitlan Tradition. They share a Core-Periphery distribution centered on the highland lake basins of central Jalisco. But Chase-Dunn and Hall have proposed a distinction between Core-Periphery Differentiation and Core-Periphery Hierarchy, and it is only in the latter that actual exploitative domination by the core develops. I hope to use their definitions to clarify differences between the two West Mexican examples.

The Shaft Tombs as Core-Periphery Differentiation

Beginning in the Mesoamerican Formative period (1500 B.C.- A.D. 200), there developed a tradition of using Shaft and Chamber tombs to inter the higher ranked individuals of West Mexican society. By the Late Formative/Early Classic period (300 B.C.-A.D. 200), elites across

the states of Jalisco, Colima, Nayarit, and Zacatecas were buried in these tombs (Map 1), which were built in a wide variety of forms and incorporating hundreds and thousands of person hours of labor in their construction, and more still in their furnishings. Offerings include jewelry, musical instruments, weapons, tools, and elaborately painted pottery vessels. Specially constructed hollow figurines placed in the shaft tombs frequently represent warriors, political figures, possible shamanic figures, and players of the Mesoamerican ritual ballgame, all probable self-representations of the elite.

Many of these offerings point to intensive competition among the elite, and not just the overt depictions of warriors; the prestige goods found in the tombs reflect another form of conflict. By their very nature, they demonstrate the abilities of their owner to control labor - whether the skilled craft specialists needed to make a figure, or the trading partners necessary to obtain jade or shell or turquoise from distant sources. The possession of prestige goods, and especially their wasteful interment with the dead, amply demonstrated the wealth and social connections of the interred and his/her social group. The presence of these kinds of artifacts points to competition between different elite factions for prestige and political power. Robert Pickering's analysis of the skeletal remains from the Huitzilapa tomb would seem to indicate that 5 of the 6 occupants were closely related genetically, emphasizing that those interred in the tomb shared membership in something resembling a lineage group.

Dioramas are found in the tombs as well, showing us houses with shaft tombs beneath, just as with many real examples. Figures depict an elaborate sequence of mourning or preparation of the dead, followed by a procession that carries them to the tomb for burial, which were then frequently left so that they could be reopened and reused. Note that these tombs are only for the elites, as 90% of known burials in central Jalisco, the one place where we have some idea of quantities, are simply buried in shallow pits with few offerings. So the objects found with the elites separated them from the commoners in life, and the ritual of burial continued to separate them from others in death.

Mesoamerican ritual emphasized the importance of elite performance before their followers, taking the form of story-telling, dance, or sacrifice. That followers witness, or even participate in, such ritual was highly important, and much of Mesoamerican public architecture

was built around this concept, with open patios meant to hold large numbers of spectators. But the small underground tombs limited public participation to the act of burial itself, and probably only a very small number of lineage members could ever actually enter the tomb. Furthermore, the rather unpredictable nature of death meant that there was no schedule to burial events.

Although a core area has been defined in central Jalisco, there is no indication that it was the source of the tomb form. The first shaft tombs from the Early and Middle Formative were already found across three different Mexican states. The Late Formative/Early Classic tombs varied extensively in form, and even in how the dead were interred. Individuals were laid out extended, tied in bundles, cremated and left in jars, or even allowed to desiccate for some time before interment. However, central Jalisco clearly had the most elaborate tombs, with shafts as deep as 20 meters and with up to 5 separate chambers, not to mention the most elaborate offerings. The elites in this area seem to have taken the idea of competition to the greatest extreme, and so the region stands out as a central core for the shaft tombs - not in the sense that they originated the idea, or that they had some role in the spread of the tombs, but simply in the sense that they took it to the most extreme degree. This would therefore appear to be what Chase-Dunn and Hall refer to as *Core-Periphery Differentiation*, in which linked societies at different levels of social complexity are interacting in an economic or social network, demonstrated by the range of imported goods found in the shaft tombs. There is no evidence that the core had any control over the periphery, most clearly shown by the rather diffuse distribution of the tombs. Even the central Jalisco elites had limits to which they could take the concept of community ritual, and it would take a more fundamental change in ideology to broaden community participation in elite aggrandizement events.

The Teuchitlan Tradition and Core-Periphery Dominance

In the Late Formative, central Jalisco elites succeeded in making these fundamental changes by incorporating surface public architecture into the process, creating the Teuchitlan Tradition. These structures consist of a circular altar atop a circular platform forming a patio, and with four rectangular platforms circling the patio. The circles get quite large, incorporating 10s and 100s of thousands of person-hours of labor. These were new forms of sacred space oriented

towards larger audiences, with a greater potential for repeated community-wide ritual than the lineage-centered mortuary ritual.

The figurines once again show us the kind of ritual behavior associated with the surface architecture. We have frequent representations of groups of people dancing in a circle, ideally suited to the circular patios. We also have intriguing images of people climbing poles set in the central altars, and sometimes balancing on top. Ignacio Bernal first noted that these appear to represent the *volador* or flyer ceremonies found throughout Mesoamerica and typically associated with late winter and the worship of the sun. J. Alden Mason found one of these circles in use at the turn of the century by the Tepecano Indians, and he recorded rituals directed towards the sky and sun.

Over the course of the Classic period, the surface architecture becomes larger, more elaborate, and the nucleus to greater populations even as the shaft tombs decline. A range of evidence suggests a single state controlled the entire core region in the Tequila valleys of central Jalisco. There is a possible capital at the site of Guachimonton, incorporating 1.25 million person hours of labor, which lies at the center of the Teuchitlan settlement zone of some 50-60,000 people. Weigand has also documented the remains of a large grid-planned system of raised fields, presumably indicating major directed food production. There are also strategic hilltop sites located at 5 of the passes into the Tequila valleys, which I have elsewhere interpreted as boundary sites delimiting the Teuchitlan core.

The circles were clearly central to life in the core area, and embedded in Teuchitlan society. The consistent replication of the critical architectural elements suggests that the associated ceremonies also occur. This becomes very important, because the circles appear outside the core as well. But 90% of the circles appear in central Jalisco, a region with a very diverse and impressive resource base, with a good agricultural base, lakes, rivers, obsidian sources, etc. The more distant sites are in comparatively resource poor regions, and have usually sacrificed easy access to agricultural land or water sources for a safe and defensible location on hilltops.

Once again we have a Core-Periphery pattern, but here it appears to mean something different. Central Jalisco does appear to be the origin of this architectural form and we see the

long continuous record of its development. The circles in central Jalisco are larger, better constructed and more precisely made. The more distant circles sometimes appear with modifications that incorporate local architectural traits into the overall form, but are careful to retain the primary elements of the circle, probably so that they can continue to use them for the dances and *volador* ceremonies. In fact, if you alter the proportions of these patios too much, anyone swinging around on a rope would crash into the roof of the houses.

The distribution of these periphery circles is much more patterned than the shaft tombs, and they are found on rivers, canyons, and other communication routes. The pattern resembles the spokes of a wheel, with the core area of central Jalisco as the hub, while the four spokes are the circles stretching off towards locations of known rare resource exploitation. At the Chalchihuites mines to the north, various kinds of colored stone, probably for jewelry and pigment; to the south and west, ocean resources like salt and shell; to the east, the cinnabar mines of Queretaro.

I think the core intentionally tried to get minor periphery groups to adopt the circular architecture and the ceremonialism, turning them from kin-based to tributary-based economies, in order to secure trade routes leading towards these resources. The periphery elites would gain a form of ceremonialism that would aid them in integrating their local group as the core had, as well as an edge in local power politics.

But negotiation is not the only factor at work here. Local elites in the periphery would have been put into the classical Prisoner's Dilemma - they had to decide whether to enter into a relationship with the core and give up some autonomy in exchange for the benefits, or they run the risk that a rival faction will do the same to gain the advantage in the local political arena. This kind of unequal relationship defines what Chase-Dunn and Hall call *Core-Periphery Hierarchy*, in which a more exploitative situation develops. The core elites must aid those in the periphery to arrive at a certain level of local political stability, or else the periphery will not have a sufficiently centralized organizational structure to protect trade routes, negotiate with the core, proselytize, or otherwise serve the core ruler. However, the core always benefits more from such a pattern. Therefore, a certain amount of local development takes place, but the periphery is still held in an underdeveloped state while dominated by the core.

Conclusions

To conclude; the shaft tombs were part of a loosely defined complex of ritual revolving around the competition between elites for authority and prestige. This competition evidently led to an increased control over labor in central Jalisco, where elites had been able to broaden community participation by incorporating surface architecture into the process. The relationships between a central Jalisco core and its West Mexican periphery differed considerably in the shaft tomb mortuary ritual and the Teuchitlan Tradition. The distribution and use of the shaft tombs indicate that there was a pattern of *Core-Periphery Differentiation* - Societies at different levels of complexity interacting in some kind of economic or social network, well demonstrated by the range of imported goods found in the shaft tombs. But the distribution of the circular architecture of the Teuchitlan Tradition suggests a much more active and dominating role on the part of the core in spreading the circles and the rituals tied to them, following a pattern that has been termed *Core-Periphery Hierarchy*. Further investigation of these questions will have to focus more on the documentation of interregional trade patterns, an area with lots of room for improvement in western Mexico.