

**The Link Between Political Boundaries and Political Models:  
a Case Study from Classic Period Jalisco, Mexico**

By

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*Abstract*

Political boundaries are often claimed to have developed only with advanced cartography, yet they are actually well documented among ancient states. Confusion has arisen partially because they do not delimit the ends of a polity, as defined by traditional western models of the state, but rather mark the transition between different strategies of political control. Anthropological research has helped to correct the narrow western view of what constitutes political activity, and allows us to tie boundaries to political models. I apply this theoretical approach to a study of the Teuchitlan Tradition, a complex society in western Mexico.

### *Comparative Background and Propositions*

It is often stated that ancient states did not possess boundaries, that such notions did not exist prior to the development of advanced cartography (e.g. Benvenuti 1973). However, maps are themselves documents embodying popular western notions of polity. Anthropology and other disciplines have helped to correct the narrow western view of what constitutes political activity and how it relates to boundaries, though time permits me to include only a few examples in my discussion.

Lattimore's extensive studies of the northern and western boundaries of China are a revealing case (1940,1962). The initial definition of boundaries took place during the Warring States Period, and were consolidated into the Great Wall with the unification of China and the subsequent Han dynasty (Figure 1). The Great Wall system was constructed in a zone coincident with the shift from irrigation to rainfall agriculture and pastoralism, and from the State to less complex forms of political organization. As Lattimore has argued, the Wall corresponded to the extent of political administration, but did not mark the limit of imperial activities. Warfare for loot or tribute continued beyond this zone, while economic integration took place over a more limited area, forming a still more closely controlled region. As Lattimore describes, the Great Wall system separated those peoples that could be "ruled by command" from those who "must be dealt with by negotiation" (1940:243), and far from keeping northerners out, it served as much to prevent rebellious frontier generals from establishing personal kingdoms and distancing themselves from the center. The uncontrolled periphery beyond the Wall was, in fact, the source of later political developments that were to repeatedly plague China. In contrast, to the far south, where environments, subsistence strategies, and degrees of political complexity were more similar to those of China itself (Higham 1989), no visible boundary was constructed during expansion into the region.

Arguably the most heavily studied boundary is that of Imperial Rome, although the scattered research tends to defy attempts at synthesis. Luttwak's (1976) political and military analysis noted that the empire used different control strategies over its history (Figure 2). The

earlier Hegemonic pattern depended upon the perception of Roman Power<sup>1</sup> to keep secondary centers in line, and a closely administered core area was surrounded by a zone of client states which, while largely left to manage their own internal affairs, were nonetheless under Roman authority. As Roman influence grew (Figure 3), the Territorial administrative structure used in the core and based on Force was extended to the periphery as part of a process of consolidation, and this more closely controlled territory was encircled by an impressive system of walls, fortifications, roads, and natural barriers. As Mattingly has noted (1992), and as critics of Luttwak have argued (e.g. Isaac 1992), a Hegemonic strategy continued to be exercised beyond these boundaries, and the boundary therefore marked the transition between Territorial and Hegemonic strategies.

While various Romanists have critiqued Luttwak's model (Isaac 1992, Whittaker 1994), the vast majority of complaints stem from the difference in perspective between those scholars whose orientation is towards events and individuals (though not, I should add, anything as sophisticated as social action theory), and those emphasizing processual models. While in need of further elaboration, Luttwak's strategies are quite useful for conceptualizing change over the long-term, and I find them especially intriguing in light of certain anthropological research.

Southall's (1956,1988) Segmentary state model, constructed in deliberate opposition to the Unitary state (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940) to characterize political relations among the Alur, is an example. Fundamental features of the model are that a primary ruler has administrative power in the central area which fades into a ritual hegemony that diminishes with increasing distance (note also Lloyd 1965, Fallers 1973, Mair 1977). The influence exerted by the central ruler over secondary rulers is based on his/her ritual authority which can be used to legitimize these lesser elite. Rulers of secondary centers have the same administrative functions and right to use force among their own subjects as the primary ruler, but at a smaller scale. This lack of functional interdependency means that secondary centers are not structurally prohibited from

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<sup>1</sup> Luttwak described Power as different from Force as a basic control mechanism, in the sense that Power is not expended except when tested, while Force is used in the absorption and administration of conquered territory. However, there seems to be a legal aspect to Force, in that it is legally sanctioned, whereas Power, whether based on prestige, religion, or other factors, is a less fixed form of authority.

switching allegiance to another primary center, or even going independent if the secondary ruler is sufficiently powerful. These structural features lead to a lack of fixed or stable boundaries.

The Segmentary state model has since been applied, largely with Southall's blessing, to Southern Asian states (e.g. Fox 1971, Stein 1977, Bentley 1986, Fritz 1986) and to political systems that do not emphasize ritual quite so heavily as the basis of a ruler's authority (Southall 1988). It has also been applied to the Classic period Maya (e.g. Houston 1993). While the model appears to have merit in the more atomized sectors of the Maya lowlands, road systems link larger sites such as Caracol (Chase and Chase 1995), El Mirador (Graham 1967), Coba (Folan et al. 1983), and Calakmul (Folan 1993) to subsidiary centers, while earthworks surround outer Tikal (Puleston 1983), suggesting the control features associated with a Territorial, or Unitary, strategy of administration. Similarly, Southall implies that the form of control exercised within the core or primary center of Segmentary states is essentially that of the Unitary state (1988:72,80-81).

Clearly, in all of these examples we are seeing different strategies being used within the same political structure, emphasizing how normative Chiefdom/State types simply fail to characterize these systems, no matter how detailed our typology may become (Cohen 1978). The frequently used Peer Polity model (Renfrew and Cherry 1986) by definition avoids discussion of asymmetrical relationships, and Peer Polities have even been defined as "autonomous" and "not subject to the jurisdiction of a higher power" (Renfrew 1986:4). As we have seen, such a seemingly basic determination is very difficult to make even in very common forms of political systems. I argue that there is a need to focus on the elite strategies that accompany and construct a given political structure. By this I do not mean to suggest plans designed and carried out by single agents, however influential, but wider strategies of domination transcending individual rulers and probably strongly encouraged by structural limitations (cf. Bourdieu 1977, Giddens 1979).

For example, Territorial or Unitary strategies seem to develop more frequently in areas of greater ecological diversity, with little prior political complexity, and these more direct strategies of control tend to be seriously constrained by distance, or more correctly, transportation/communication technology. The boundaries of such a system are marked in the examples discussed above by fortifications and walls, but also by roads and other control features

that serve to aid the polity in maintaining control over not only the boundary but also the territory encompassed by it. The Chinese example comes immediately to mind, and some political sociologists (e.g. Strassoldo 1980) have similarly proposed that a controlled boundary can encourage increased stability and consolidation within.

As for Segmentary or Hegemonic strategies, different scholars have tended to focus on distinct aspects - kinship ties, personal qualities of rulers, ritual authority, inter-elite negotiated arrangements, often in concert with military threat - with different goals - tribute, prestige, power. Realistically, an elite probably drew upon several, and most of these tactics can be considered different forms of patron-client arrangements between elites of different levels of power and influence to allocate human and natural resources. The result, however, was similar - primary rulers may have directly administered their own center or territorial core, but held only a shifting authority over secondary rulers, who in turn controlled their centers, and dictated to lesser rulers. The resultant nesting of polities within polities is a nightmare for archaeological interpretation, should we continue to use political types based on autonomous units and normative depictions of power relations.

With political relationships of this type, it is not surprising that Segmentary or Hegemonic strategies tend to be practiced in regions with prior complex political organization, as it would be far less efficient to attempt to restructure and integrate existing polities into a Unitary bureaucracy. There is also a tendency to use these strategies when a polity extends its authority over different ethnic groups, where cultural differences may inhibit absorption and direct control. While the primary ruler of such a system may well have the ability to mobilize labor and delimit its core territory, he/she had little reason or authority to incorporate subsidiary centers within a controlled boundary when the affiliation of those centers is very unstable and likely to shift.

The examples discussed here suggest that controlled boundaries mark the transition between areas where Territorial/ Unitary vs. Hegemonic/ Segmentary strategies are being practiced. This is largely what political boundaries do today - despite the fact that they can appear quite sudden and absolute (Figure 4), they only encompass that territory subject to direct political control. Polities large and small can exert influence beyond their borders in certain capacities (compare the United States and Libya), though I'll freely admit that the boundary marks a greater

distinction today than in the distant past.

### *Case Study - The Teuchitlán Tradition of Central Jalisco*

The Teuchitlán Tradition of central Jalisco has been defined over the past 25 years on the basis of the unique concentric circular public architecture that formed the nucleus of its political and social system (Figure 5). These complexes are occasionally found with elaborate shaft tombs underneath the satellite structures (Figure 6), and are shown in ceramic models depicting both everyday and apparently ceremonial activities (Figure 7).

On the basis of monumental architecture, complex settlement hierarchy, and in particular the core-periphery distribution of this unmistakable architecture in west Mexico, Weigand (1985, 1992) has argued that the central core of the Tradition in Jalisco may have been organized into one or more states during the Classic period, a proposal which has attracted criticism. The relationship between the core and more distant settlements using the same architecture has been left suitably vague.

During the Late Formative, early forms of the circular architecture (Figure 8) formed the public nucleus of settlements organized into several apparently autonomous clusters within the linked Magdalena and La Vega lake basins. The shaft tomb mortuary tradition was at its peak (Figure 9) (cf. Ramos de la Vega and López Mestas C. 1996). Beyond these central lake basins, there are no known examples of the architecture, and even the passes connecting this core area to the outside show little sign of settlement.

Although Early and Middle Classic phases have been defined both architecturally and ceramically, they have been difficult to distinguish in survey, and hence most global studies of regional settlement patterns have tended to lump them (e.g. Weigand 1992, Ohnerson and Varien 1996). Researchers have documented an increased emphasis on larger and more elaborate public architecture at the expense of elite tombs (Figure 10), population growth perhaps associated with in-migration, concentration of settlement within particular areas of the core region (Figure 11), and the development of a primary center at Teuchitlán and four secondary centers elsewhere in the core. Although poorly placed in time, the grid-planned raised fields identified within the core are considered most likely to pertain to this Middle Classic period (Figure 12).

Conservative population estimates for the combined Early and Middle Classic phases in the core range around 40-70,000 people across some 300 km<sup>2</sup>.

During the Early Classic, the sites of Llano Grande, the Southwestern Tepopote Complex, and Peñol de Tepopote were founded, joining the slightly earlier Cerro Pipiole site. The hilltop site of El Molino, on the route southeast out of the core towards Lake Chapala, was probably founded by this time as well. All were small, special purpose sites with simple examples of Teuchitlán Tradition architecture, located in strategic positions over the passes leading into the Teuchitlán core, consistent with a function of observing and interfering with any traffic attempting to enter the core (Beekman 1996). In addition, these sites include walls organized into defensive configurations limiting access (Figure 13), display attributes of partial self-sufficiency such as agricultural terraces, and were capable of communication with the core area and even other passes into the core (as evidenced by line of sight and possible signal fire windbreaks) (Figure 14). Yet what I think we have here are examples of something Shirley Gorenstein has described in another context - small sites not designed to defend themselves so much as to serve the purposes of a more significant entity beyond them, the Teuchitlán core.

In the La Venta Corridor (Figure 15), where it is easier to separate Early and Middle Classic phases, we find that most of the non-strategic settlement is abandoned and the strategic sites are nearly all that remains (Figure 16), indications of the increasing specialization of the boundary region. Small Teuchitlán Tradition sites here and in the adjacent Atemajac valley are abandoned as part of what Weigand and I consider to be a consolidation process in the core.

Yet during this same Early Classic period, and probably continuing into the Middle Classic, dozens of examples of Teuchitlán Tradition architecture are found in settlements in Colima (Rosalio Serna 1991), Nayarit (Weigand 1992, Gabriela Zepeda personal communication 1996), northern Jalisco, Zacatecas (Cabrero García 1989), Guanajuato (Crespo 1993, Efraín Cárdenas personal communication 1995), and Querétaro (Nalda 1987) (Figure 17). In contrast to those in the core, these structures are almost all small and come from the lowest tiers of the architectural hierarchy, are frequently located in commanding positions overlooking communication routes, often integrate local architectural features into the Teuchitlán form (Figure 18), and in Guanajuato at least, are found somewhat offset within sites focused on different, very

local, forms of public architecture (Figure 19). In contrast, no parallels have been drawn between core and periphery residential architecture to date. Ceramics and burial patterns are quite different, although Pseudo-Cloisonne elite ceramics may have tied these regions together, pending further chronological data (Figure 20).

Therefore, while the Teuchitlán Tradition architecture appears to be deeply embedded within central Jalisco core society, those examples in the periphery are infrequent and appear distinctly out of context. I am therefore very skeptical of any interpretations drawing upon direct colonization of peripheral areas by the core, or the permanent residence of even small numbers of core elite in these distant sites. I consider these to be locally built imitations of core Teuchitlán Tradition architecture.

Most of these distant sites in what we term the periphery are located along what were probably communication routes towards known areas of intense resource exploitation (Figure 21). The cinnabar mines of Querétaro, probably local resources from the coast, the chert and mineral mines of Chalchihuites, and the salt production facilities of Sayula. One problem is that the last two of these were actually exploited primarily during the Epiclassic (A.D. 600-900), but we may not be talking about a large volume of material being moved around during the earlier Classic period.

I argue that, beginning with the Early Classic, the core Teuchitlán Tradition elites became sufficiently centralized to begin practicing a Unitary strategy of control within the core. Small specialized sites were established in commanding positions in the corridors, allowing them to monitor any traffic entering or leaving the core. I do not want to overemphasize their military role, and prefer to call them "control sites", which better encompasses their likely functions as observation posts, message relay points, visible symbols of state authority, local administrative centers, points of contact with outside polities, and links with external economic systems.

With the depopulation of the outer core and the concentration of settlement along the lake shores, the control sites marking the boundary of the polity were left relatively isolated, emphasizing the nature of the strategy being followed.

Beyond the core area and the control sites thought to define the boundary of direct forms of control, we have a very different archaeological pattern. I have proposed that core elites were

interested in securing transportation routes between the core and distant resources, as well as the prestige of a far flung network of adherents. Local elites in the periphery adopted the Teuchitlán Tradition architecture and the accompanying symbolism as part of their participation in this regional interaction network, from which they could have benefited in terms of political legitimation. There are faint indications that the distant centers pertain to earlier or later periods, suggesting that the periphery was temporally as well as spatially discontinuous.

Now with the onset of the Epiclassic, the system outlined here underwent gradual transformation and collapse (Figure 22). New ceramics, burial patterns, and public architecture with antecedents in the Bajío of Guanajuato appeared in the Teuchitlán core area, and several researchers have argued for the actual migration of new peoples (e.g. Schöndube 1980, Weigand 1992, Galván n.d., Beekman and Christensen n.d.). Core ceramics and burial patterns were replaced, while architecture and settlement pattern changes are more complex and drawn out. Settlement with the new architecture appears to have an independent focus within the southern part of the core, but some older sites display strange graftings of the new rectangular architecture onto the older circular forms (Figure 23). The proposed boundary sites were abandoned with the beginning of these changes, suggesting to me that the Territorial control over the core region had most likely collapsed, not surprising in light of the evidence for new populations with entirely new sets of power relations.

By the end of the Epiclassic, all aspects of Teuchitlán Tradition material culture had been replaced, and the Postclassic pattern is considerably different. When the La Venta Corridor is reoccupied, probably in the Late Postclassic, settlement is more evenly distributed, with less emphasis on a strategic function for the corridor (Figure 24). Without a polity centralized enough to maintain control over the entire central valley area, the corridors lost their special significance as points of control.

To conclude, I believe that the examples of known political boundaries from early states agree with certain lines of thought in the political anthropological literature, and argue that controlled boundaries tend to occur along the dividing line between different forms of political control. I find it most productive to conceptualize these differences in terms of political strategies rather than types, and believe that such an approach has helped support recent propositions as to

the degree of centralization of the Teuchitlán Tradition in western Mexico.

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