

or were those crafts carried out by different households in this ward or neighborhood at the edge of the site? That question would take excavation to unravel.

## 2.2. The Importance of Domestic Units in Mesoamerica

The household was an important Mesoamerican institution that had long-term durability (Kowalewski and Heredia 2020). This durability of domestic units was documented decades ago in the Maya Lowlands by stratigraphic excavations of houses that exposed long sequences of rebuilding and other activities carried out over time on the same spot (e.g., Willey et al. 1965). The same pattern was observed in excavations of Formative period houses in the Valley of Oaxaca in the late 1960s–1970s (Drennan 1976; Flannery and Marcus 2005; Whalen 1981). Generally, throughout the prehispanic era (Early Formative through the Postclassic period), household units were small, consisting of a nuclear family, although larger households did develop in some times and places (Kowalewski and Heredia 2020). These households were the principal units of production and consumption in prehispanic Mesoamerica (Hirth 2009a, 1).

Prior to our excavations in Ejutla in the early 1990s, most houses excavated in the Valley of Oaxaca dated to the Formative period (Drennan 1976; Flannery 1976a; Flannery and Marcus 2005; Whalen 1981; Winter 1972). The early house was a small, rectangular, one-room structure with a hard-packed earthen floor and walls built with wattle and daub, typically 15–25 m<sup>2</sup> in size (Flannery 1976b; Winter 1976a). Outdoor workspace surrounding the house comprised a range of features, including storage pits, hearths, ovens, activity areas, household middens, and burials, all within an area of 300–400 m<sup>2</sup> (Flannery and Marcus 2005, 34; Winter 1976a). These residential spaces were generally separated from each other by 20–40 m of open space (Winter 1976a).

Three Classic period houses excavated in a residential area north of the Main Plaza at Monte Albán had a different plan (Winter 1974). The houses, located on separate terraces and spaced approximately 25 m apart, had stone foundations and walls of adobe, with small rooms enclosing three or four sides of a central, square patio with a plaster floor. The deceased were often interred inside the house, typically in small tombs under the floor of one of the rooms or under the patio. Are these the patterns we would find in a Classic period residence in Ejutla, far from the capital?

Inspired by the survey findings at Ejutla, we returned to the site to excavate houses and examine household activities, not just the crafting of shell ornaments. Over four field seasons (1990–93), we excavated a small Classic period residence of intermediate status and its immediate surroundings, where we documented multicrafting by one household, but we were blocked from uncovering the entire house by adjacent modern house lots that limited

the expansion of our excavations. And finding additional intact ancient houses in the heavily plowed fields (we did not find the house until the third year of the project) would be time-consuming.

During the regional surveys in both Oaxaca and Ejutla, we had mapped many hilltop sites where the ancient inhabitants had artificially flattened the slopes and constructed stone retaining walls to create flat spaces on which to build their houses. These sites are generally far from contemporary villages and have suffered less destruction from modern activities, such as heavy plowing. We often could see stone foundations and other remains of residential structures, and surface evidence of various craft activities was not uncommon. Terrace sites were a common form of settlement in Oaxaca, especially during the Classic period, when more than half of the population lived in one of these densely packed towns (Feinman and Nicholas 2013). The highest concentration of terrace sites was in the Tlacolula, or eastern, arm of the valley. A terrace site in Tlacolula seemed to be the ideal place to begin excavating more houses.

## 2.3. Excavations at Other Classic Period Sites in the Valley of Oaxaca

Our initial goal was to excavate a sample of houses at multiple locations to obtain household-level information on domestic activities that we could compare to Ejutla and begin to explore questions concerning the region's ancient economy (e.g., Feinman 1999; Feinman and Nicholas 2004a, 2007a, 2010, 2012). We ultimately excavated Classic period houses at three sites in the dry Tlacolula Valley, two hilltop terrace sites—El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress—and a valley floor site—Lambityeco—in a setting more similar to the Ejutla site (see Figure 1.1). All four sites have extended occupational histories, although most of the excavated contexts pertain to the Classic period or the very beginning of the Early Postclassic period (ca. 900–1200 CE). Each site was at its apogee during the Classic period. At all four sites we excavated broad horizontal exposures to uncover complete houses and associated outdoor work and midden areas. To ensure comparability, we followed consistent field and laboratory methods and procedures (see chapter 3). At the three Tlacolula sites we recovered information that touches on many of the questions that we began investigating at Ejutla, and here we briefly describe the sites and the extent of our investigations.

El Palmillo is a large terrace site on the top and steep slopes of a rocky promontory that descends from the mountain ridge that defines the eastern edge of the Valley of Oaxaca. At its greatest expanse during the Classic period, the site's inhabitants had constructed more than 1400 terraces, most of which were residential (Feinman and Nicholas 2004b). Over a decade (1999–2008) we excavated eight houses on residential terraces spanning the bottom to the top of the hill (Feinman and Nicholas 2009, 2012; Feinman et al. 2002a). The three houses near the bottom of the hill were smaller