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Domestic Specialization and Multicrafting in Theoretical Context

To this point, we have established that a Classic period domestic unit at the eastern edge of the Ejutla site engaged in crafting goods that almost certainly were not produced primarily for their own consumption. In this chapter and those that follow, we outline and contextualize this finding and why it is important for understanding the Classic period economy of Oaxaca, and present further details regarding the production technologies and practices for a range of materials. We also outline what we know about the distribution of the products that were made by this household, and what and how these production and distribution practices tell us about premodern economies.

The archaeological investigations at and findings from the Ejutla site have had a significant influence on our own thinking regarding craft specialization and prehispanic Mesoamerican economies more generally. In this chapter, we step back from the description and analysis of empirical discoveries and place those findings and current thoughts on production in a broader historical and conceptual context. By so doing, we illustrate how archaeological data, first from the Ejutla site, and then when examined in a wider context of new research elsewhere, stimulated our theoretical rethinking. In the process, we moved away from generalized, unilinear models and categorical treatments of specialization, which were derived principally from selective attention to the Eurasian past, toward a major reframing of prehispanic Mesoamerican economies (Feinman and Nicholas 2012) and premodern economies more generally (Feinman 2017).

We begin by defining craft specialization and placing the archaeological examination of this practice in historical context. This intellectual background is relevant as the senior author's research in the Valley of Oaxaca began with an interest in economic specialization (Feinman 1980), and those perspectives shifted to a degree in concert with the new findings derived from the Ejutla research. Thus, the emphasis here is to tie changing disciplinary views of craft specialization to seeming conundrums posed by observations from the Ejutla research. Their iterative juxtaposition had a role in formulating how we think about prehispanic Mesoamerican economies and specifically production and distribution at Ejutla.

6.1. Craft Specialization and Its Early Archaeological Framing

The term 'craft specialization' has been critically examined (Clark 1995; Rice 2009), yet we think it is a useful term to describe nonagricultural production intended for exchange. By craft, we infer manufacture by humans as opposed to grown in the field or garden. Use of the term does not imply a specific level of skill or technical expertise. In using the term 'specialization,' we reference John Clark and William Parry (1990, 297), who broadly define it as the "production of alienable durable goods for nondependent consumption." That is, the products are destined for consumers beyond the maker's or the producer's immediate domestic unit. We employ this broad definition so as to intentionally decouple any presumptions that have been previously assumed regarding the intensity or location of production, the targeting to a specific subset of consumers, or a particular mode of distribution. We see craft specialization as an activity more than a category or taxonomic attribute always linked to a specific social scale (Cross 1993). The realm of behaviors associated with craft specializations should be fleshed out and defined as much as possible for each historical context.

Given the global breadth and analytical depth of current archaeological research focused on craft production (e.g., Costin 2020; Schortman and Urban 2004), related to many different materials and goods, it may surprise that the implementation of archaeological investigations with a focus on economic specialization began only six to seven decades ago. With that timing, the history of craft production studies in archaeology is tightly intertwined with the advent of neoevolutionary theories and neo-Marxist thought in the discipline (Wailes 1996), often linked with sociopolitical change. Early efforts to tease production information from the archaeological record began with the seminal writings of V. Gordon Childe (e.g., 1949, 1950), who viewed craft specialization as a categorical attribute of the Urban Revolution, an outgrowth of agrarian surplus and tied to elite economic control. Childe (1949) pointed the way toward drawing 'social facts' from 'material things,' and the studies that followed both built on and shadow-boxed with his seminal writings (Wright 1996). Although Childe's perspective was tied empirically to ancient Mesopotamia and metallurgy (Wailes 1996), implications from his (and related) conceptual framings were extended much more widely.

Mid-twentieth-century neoevolutionary framing saw economic specialization as a nominal or categorical variable, either present or not, and, if present, presumed to be full-time. In this unilinear view of change (Costin 2020; Fargher 2009), craft specialization was seen to emerge with urbanism, whereas pre-urban households and settlements generally were presumed self-sufficient (Sahlins 1972). In contexts with urban centers, craft specialization was largely

assumed to have been situated in cities themselves, while agrarian production was placed in more rural settings.

Based on these underlying tenets, early archaeological theorizing on economic production advanced a unilinear or monolithic sequence from domestic production for immediate use to workshop and ultimately factory manufacture (van der Leeuw 1976, 1977; Peacock 1982; Santley et al. 1989). These evolutionary schemes, analogically and selectively drawn from snapshots of historical and ethnographic data, were modeled broadly on similar stepped sequences of political organizational change (e.g., Fried 1967; Service 1962). In both cases, stages in the sequence were viewed categorically, so the intensity of production (quantities produced) was coupled with the scale of production (where goods were made), and to a somewhat lesser degree with presumed patterns of consumption (from immediate use by the maker's household to progressively more far-reaching modes of transfer and exchange). To a large degree and for decades (see Feinman 1999; Feinman and Nicholas 2000), production activities localized to domestic contexts were uncritically interpreted as nonspecialized production, hence, not for exchange. This false binary, which linked household production to self-sufficiency and presumed that specialized production was indicative of nondomestic contexts, was not directly challenged until Cathy Costin (1991) decoupled scale, intensity, and other dimensions of economic specialization. Of course, this dissection of the unilinear or monolithic frame was grounded in an expanded empirical record and set of archaeological indicators for craft production, to which we now turn.

6.2. Developing Archaeological Indicators and Frames for Specialized Production

From the earliest efforts to identify economic specialization in the archaeological record, investigators generally built on and offered expansions of (and gentle challenges to) Childe's (1950) conceptual framework. A key, early explicit effort (Evans 1978) to define archaeological indicators of economic specialization was focused on the Balkan Chalcolithic (Copper Age, ca. 5000–3500 BCE). Evans's overview, which looked at a range of different crafts including pottery, flint, and copper metallurgy from a suite of excavated sites, was instrumental in that it outlined a series of criteria for defining contexts of craft production. These indicators included tool kits associated with craft activities, unusual concentrations of raw or partially worked materials, defined areas of activity associated with production, and features linked to the manufacture process, such as ceramic firing features. In degrees of discord with more monolithic framing, the Chalcolithic contexts for these activities were decidedly not urban, and Evans (1978) also favored a view that these Balkan producers devoted less than full time to the production of the identified craft activities.

For the study of prehispanic Mesoamerica, the 1960s and 1970s were a key hinge point during which questions investigating urbanism, states, and hypothesized associated transitions (Rice 1981) subsumed the earlier disciplinary focus on chronology building. The identification and interpretation of production activities, especially for pottery and stone tools, became a key dimension of these studies, which mainly were focused on single sites examined through excavations (e.g., Shafer and Hester 1983) and intensive site-focused surface surveys (e.g., Spence 1981). Using findings from systematic regional surveys, the senior author and colleagues identified production locations for pottery, stone, shell, and other materials to begin to define shifts in the economic landscape over time (Blanton 1978; Feinman 1980). Unusual concentrations and densities of certain artifacts and materials provided the principal evidential indicators for all of these identifications, although for pottery, broad lines of indicative evidence were outlined (e.g., Stark 1985).

By the 1980s, the expansion of studies focused on craft production from around the globe broadened the contexts and conditions in which specialized craftwork occurred and diversified. Although 'attached specialists,' linked to political principals and their households, were one common context for producers, other production activities were more untethered from or 'independent' of the political process. Models proposed that specialized production was in different contexts spurred by commercialism, economic or demographic growth, and other socioeconomic factors (Brumfiel and Earle 1987). It became clear that specialized production was not merely an outgrowth of urbanism or the rise of states but could proceed those transitions as well as vary along various decoupled axes of variability.

Recognition that the premodern contexts of craft specialization were not strictly tied to elite sponsorship or top-down control provided a wide intellectual runway for Costin (1991) to outline multiple dimensions of variation in this economic activity, and to disentangle economic specialization from the necessity of political management, a linear process of change, or a nominal, categorical definition. Drawing on expanded literature, Costin (1991, 9) defined four key axes or dimensions of variability: context (degree of elite sponsorship), concentration (distribution of production activities), scale (setting—house to factory), and intensity (volume of production), which did not necessarily shift in concert.

For Mesoamerican archaeology, Costin's (1991) publication, and especially her decoupling of the scale and intensity of production, was timely as it arrived when debates were arising regarding two important examples of craft production in prehispanic Mesoamerica: obsidian working at Teotihuacan (Central Mexico) and chert tool production at Colha (Belize). In both cases, the presumed neoevolutionary link between levels of production for exchange (intensity) and the locus of production (scale) created interpretive dissonance. At Teotihuacan, the massive amounts of surface obsidian as well as the kinds of debitage recovered seemed to provide clear indications of