

## Theoretical Implications and Concluding Thoughts

“Projects grow like organisms, with serendipity and supple adjustment, not like the foreordained steps of a high school proof in plane geometry.”

*(Stephen J. Gould 1985, 174)*

Our interest in Ejutla began during the waning days of the Valley of Oaxaca Settlement Pattern Project in 1980, as we walked the path that formed the southern boundary of the project’s survey area. This boundary was arbitrary, based on time and local permissions, and settlement did not drop off as we neared the border with the Ejutla district, to the south. We often thought about what might lie farther south and soon made plans to return to Oaxaca to extend the survey to include the Ejutla Valley (Feinman and Nicholas 1990, 2013), but we never imagined the anomalous quantities of cut marine shell, including broken ornaments, that we would find on the surface at the edge of Ejutla de Crespo, the contemporary district head town. Sites with massive accumulations of shell, places where that marine material seemingly was worked, are extremely rare in the landlocked Valley of Oaxaca, and finding even one piece of shell at a site during the survey was a rare event. So, in 1990, we set out to find why there was so much shell at the prehispanic site under the modern town of Ejutla de Crespo. Although, to start, we could not date the surface shell to a specific time period, the best-represented taxa were Pacific Coast varieties that were generally used for ornamentation rather than food in prehispanic Mesoamerica. This piqued our interest in interregional interaction between Ejutla and the Valley of Oaxaca and between Ejutla and the Pacific Coast.

We began the excavations at the Ejutla site with several basic questions in mind. When did the shell working occur? Most of the broken pottery on the surface could pertain to the Classic period, but ceramics from multiple periods (Monte Albán Late I–Monte Albán V, 300 BCE–1520 CE) were mixed with the shell debris and other artifacts. From where was the shell procured, and was it all from the Pacific Coast? What was the socioeconomic context of production? We had found dense surface shell over a large area at the eastern edge of the prehispanic site, so was this a ward of households whose occupants crafted shell into ornaments as Flannery and Marcus (2005, 66; Marcus 1989) argued for Formative period San José Mogote, or something else? Was this activity undertaken in a residential context, as indicated by surface debris that we observed mixed with the shell?

But the confirmation of shell ornament production at Ejutla was not all that awaited us. During the excavations we recovered thousands of pieces of cut and broken shell, but few complete ornaments, from a dense midden

adjacent to a residential structure that was occupied during the Classic period (ca. 550–800 CE). Most of the shell was from the Pacific Coast, 100 km south of Ejutla over steep mountains. Chemical and microartifactual analysis of the floor helped tie the residents of the house to shell ornament production, but there were few ornaments in the house and only one small shell bead in the subfloor tomb. Given the huge quantities of cut shell debris in the midden and the rarity of finished shell ornaments in and near the house, we reasoned that the Ejutla shell workers crafted high volumes of ornaments for exchange and not for their own consumption.

The Ejutla craftworkers who fashioned shell into ornaments were specialists, in the sense that they produced for exchange or economic transfer. But they enacted their craft in a residential context. Clearly, they were not devoted full-time to this activity and engaged in multicrafting, including ceramic production, which we ultimately discovered and documented with more precise chronological control that it temporally proceeded shell ornament manufacture at least in the area we excavated.

The Ejutla multi-craftworkers also applied some of the same techniques and tools to produce lapidary objects, a process referred to as cross-craft technology (Shimada 1996, 2007). Around and under the excavated house there were at least five ash-filled pits, or pit kilns, and the amount of broken pottery we encountered during the excavations was overwhelming, including thousands of mold-made clay figurine fragments, hundreds of sherds with firing defects, and molds for making figurines and other ceramic forms. The figurines were not only made for the household but were consumed at other sites in the Ejutla Valley (Carpenter and Feinman 1999; Feinman 1999). In sum, the Ejutla artisans produced multiple crafts for exchange at a high level of intensity situated in a residential context. The practice of multiple craft production activities in association with domestic units (Feinman 1999; Feinman and Nicholas 2007a) has recently been more widely recognized in prehispanic Mesoamerica as well as in other premodern economies (Brumfiel and Nichols 2009; Hirth 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Shimada 2007).

The new evidence from Ejutla on the nature of production and exchange in the Classic period economy of Oaxaca had revolutionary ramifications for how we think about Mesoamerican economies and even premodern economies

more broadly. For the Ejutla craftworkers, the economy was not just local, as they engaged in the production of a range of goods for both regional and interregional exchange. They not only crafted figurines and spindle whorls for their own consumption but also traded them to other sites in the Ejutla Valley. Shell from the Pacific Coast reached Ejutla along travel routes that also extended farther north to central Oaxaca, bringing raw shell and likely finished ornaments from Ejutla to Monte Albán, the major consumer of shell ornaments in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Classic period. Routes of exchange extended all the way to Central Mexico, where mica from Ejutla reached Teotihuacan. Although several mica sources are present along the western edge of the Valley of Oaxaca, including near Monte Albán, an analysis of mica from Teotihuacan and Monte Albán sourced all the samples to mines in Ejutla (Manzanilla et al. 2017).

That craft specialization of both utilitarian and prestige goods was situated in a domestic context in Ejutla was counter to traditional models (e.g., Marx 1971) that uncritically extrapolated from recent histories of other global regions and presumed that most production in prehispanic Mesoamerican contexts would have been enacted in nondomestic workshops, which then could be centrally controlled through the hands of top-down governors or principals (Feinman 1999, Feinman and Nicholas 2000, 2012). Instead of this presumed yet entrenched model, the Ejutla research underpinned a wider realization that households were a key Mesoamerican institution (Kowalewski and Heredia 2020) that served as the primary unit of specialized production (e.g., Charlton et al. 1993; Feinman 1999; Hirth 2009b). This finding completely forces a reconsideration of how prehispanic Mesoamerican production, distribution, and consumption were organized and varied spatiotemporally, thereby raising doubts about long-held visions of premodern economies more generally (e.g., Blanton and Feinman 2024; Feinman 2017; Feinman and Garraty 2010; Feinman and Nicholas 2012).

Tied into economic and social networks, prehispanic Mesoamerican households were also tied into intermediate institutions, such as neighborhoods, that shared labor (Carballo et al. 2022). If hundreds or thousands of households in regions across prehispanic Mesoamerica produced goods for exchange, how could that production possibly be centrally administered or controlled? The realization that economic specialization in Mesoamerica was mostly centered in houses also raised fundamental questions about the distribution and consumption of craft products. Although markets, at grand scale, have long been recognized for the Aztecs, their perceived importance has been downplayed for earlier times (e.g., Cook 1968). The findings from Ejutla underpinned a key step in eclipsing the false market/no-market dichotomy (Wilk 1998, 469) for prehispanic Mesoamerican economies and premodern economies more generally (Feinman 2017; Feinman and Nicholas 2010). Many recent studies have compiled multiple lines of evidence to document the importance

and diversity of precolonial Mesoamerican markets (e.g., Feinman and Garraty 2010; Garraty and Stark 2010; Masson and Freidel 2012; Shaw 2012) long before the Aztec empire.

During the excavations we arrived at answers for the queries that we began with, and more, but we still came away with additional questions that we could not answer based on what we discovered at Ejutla or even if we had continued at the site. We had found specialized production centered in houses for the Classic period in Oaxaca, just as it was during the Early Formative period in the region (Flannery and Winter 1976), and fully realized the importance of household archaeology. We wanted to excavate more houses. How representative were our findings from one house in Ejutla? Were other craft activities centered in residential contexts? The problem we faced was that it was difficult to find houses in the alluvial environment of Ejutla. We did not definitively identify the house that we excavated until the third season of excavation. There was no evidence of it on the surface. Other areas at the edge of the modern village were inaccessible. And testing in one area where surface remains were more visible revealed that all deposits had been plowed to high bedrock, completely destroying whatever prehispanic structure or other feature may have been there. Of course, at the time we were excavating in Ejutla, the surface geophysical technologies to detect subsurface features were not what they are today (e.g., Conyers 2023).

The aim to build and study a more robust sample of Classic period houses for Oaxaca led us to look for other sites where it would be possible to implement this research design. Many hilltop terrace sites had been mapped during the regional surveys, especially in the eastern, Tlacolula arm of the valley. They appeared to present our best opportunity. Residential architecture had been recorded on many terraces at these hilltop sites, often in conjunction with evidence of different craft activities. And many of these sites had not experienced the post-abandonment destruction of plowing and more recent constructions that have impacted many sites in more accessible, floodplain locations. Would we find specialized production in domestic settings? Would this production be for local consumption, for exchange, or for both, as in Ejutla? The two hilltop sites we chose to excavate are El Palmillo and the Mitla Fortress, where we excavated a total of 11 houses, all dating to the Classic period. For other reasons we were given the opportunity to excavate a third site in Tlacolula, Lambityeco, which has been in the literature since John Paddock's excavations there in the 1960s (e.g., Lind and Urcid 2010). Lambityeco is located on alluvial terrain in central Tlacolula, in an environment more similar to Ejutla than the hilltop sites, but because it is part of an archaeological zone, it was more protected, and we excavated one house and several other structures in the civic-ceremonial core of the site. Our excavations at these other sites expanded our knowledge about the Classic period economy of Oaxaca and, importantly, provided data to document both site and regional variation

at the time that the Monte Albán polity was at its apex. At present, we plan future volumes that feature excavations at all three sites. Although our aim is to continue to focus these volumes on production and exchange, we will also examine other social and economic relations between households as well as the participation of householders in more overarching economic and political networks.

But to close, it is important to not lose sight of what we learned from the Ejutla excavations. We ascertained that specialized production for exchange in Oaxaca was carried out in domestic settings, that the goods produced were distributed beyond the house and the site, and that these findings have implications for our perspective on the Classic period economy in Oaxaca. We learned the importance of macroscale interactions and the interregional movement of goods. Ejutla during the Classic period was closely connected to the rest of the Valley of Oaxaca and the Pacific Coast, moving both shell and obsidian from West Mexico into the central valleys, and exchanging mica all the way to Teotihuacan in Central Mexico. And maybe most significantly, we learned the importance of looking at houses, as this smaller scale opens up lenses of variation for a given time and space. Household variation and the diverse socioeconomic connections between these domestic units make it blatantly clear that the past was neither homogeneous, static, nor elite-determined. Even those of modest means, often left out of written and documentary histories, played necessary roles and have key lessons to tell.



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