

## Domination, Negotiation, and Collapse

### A HISTORY OF CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY ON THE OAXACA COAST BEFORE THE LATE POSTCLASSIC

The nature of sociopolitical change during the Classic to Postclassic transition in Mesoamerica has been a source of great research interest and debate. Throughout most of Mesoamerica this period, lasting from about 600 to 1000 CE, was characterized by the fragmentation or collapse of the complex polities that dominated the Classic period (250–800 CE) political landscape. Archaeological, iconographic, and epigraphic research suggests that this period was characterized by dramatic changes in political institutions and ruling ideologies as well as depopulation in some regions (Cowgill 1979; Culbert 1973; Demarest et al. 2004; Diehl and Berlo 1989; Sabloff and Andrews 1986; Webster et al. 2000). Factors that have been implicated in the collapse include warfare, internal revolt, anthropogenic landscape degradation, and climate change. Despite the dramatic sociopolitical changes documented for this period, many questions remain as to their timing, nature, and causes.

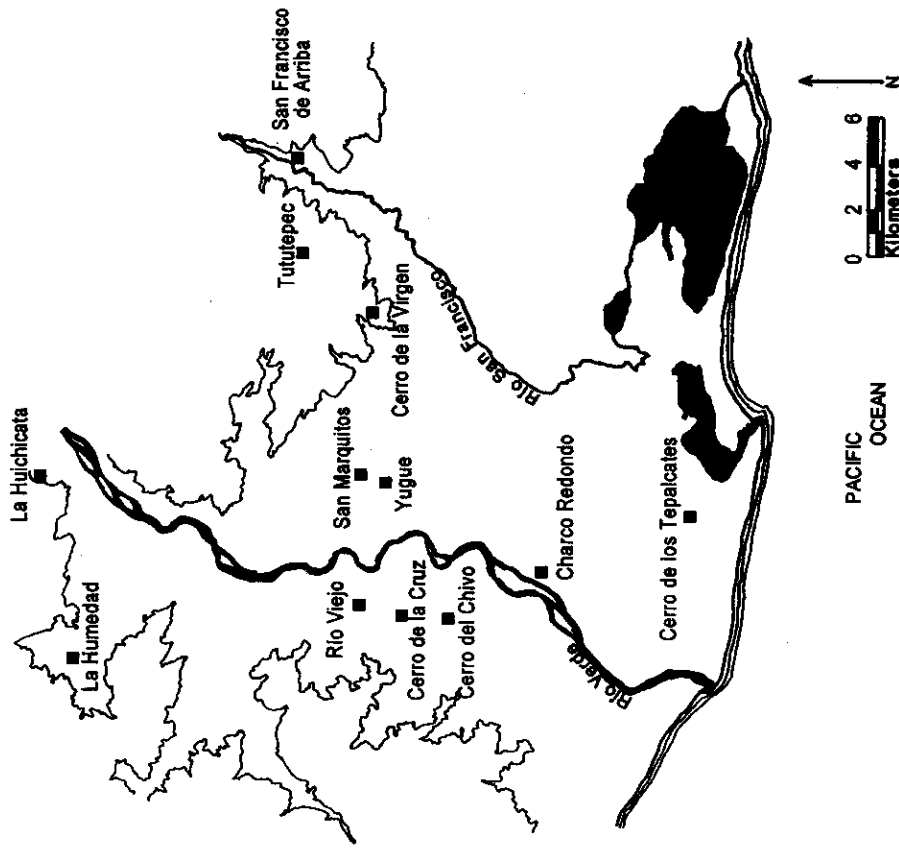
Perhaps nowhere in Mesoamerica has the Classic period collapse been as hotly debated as in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, where scholars disagree on the nature and timing of demographic and sociopolitical changes (Marcus and Flannery 1990; Winter 1989, 1994). In highland Oaxaca, problems with clearly



2001; Joyce et al. 2004; Joyce and King 2001; King 2003). I consider the Classic to Postclassic transition from the perspective of the history of centralized political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley. The history of sociopolitical change in the region has been the focus of interdisciplinary research over the past twenty years (Barber 2005; Grove 1988; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 1999, 2005; Joyce et al. 1998; Joyce et al. 2001; King 2003; Urcid and Joyce 2001; Workinger 2002). This research has included horizontal and/or block excavations at the sites of Río Viejo, Cerro de la Cruz, San Francisco de Arriba, Yugüe, Cerro de la Virgen, and Tututepec as well as test excavations at thirteen other sites. The entire region has been the focus of a non-systematic surface reconnaissance, and full-coverage surveys have systematically studied an area of 152 square kilometers (Joyce 1999; Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce et al. 2004; Workinger 2002).

The regional data demonstrate an initial period of political centralization toward the end of the Formative period, followed by a political collapse at ca. 250 CE. A second period of centralization occurred during the Late Classic period (500–800 CE) followed by collapse in the Early Postclassic (800–1100 CE). Although not a focus of this chapter, the prehispanic sequence ends with a third period of centralization during the Late Postclassic (1100–1522 CE), which was terminated abruptly by the Spanish Conquest. My historical analysis is based on a poststructural theoretical framework (e.g., Giddens 1979; Janusek 2004; Joyce et al. 2001; Pauketat 2001) and argues that regional political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley was relatively unstable and negotiated and was continuously produced by dynamic, ongoing social relations. Rather than representing the end of a long period of political relations that were overdetermined by a coherent and integrated political structure dominated by the elite (e.g., Fox et al. 1996; Marcus and Flannery 1996:chapter 15; Martin and Grube 2000; Schele and Mathews 1998), the Classic period collapse appears more like a “moment” prefigured, at least in part, by social contradictions and tensions that were inherent in the production of centralized political systems. I argue that archaeologists need to move away from the structuralist typologies that have dominated research on political relations in the past. Before discussing the archaeology of the lower Río Verde Valley, I briefly consider the implications of poststructural theory for models of Mesoamerican political organization.

Approaches to the political history of Mesoamerican polities have most often relied on structuralist conceptions of political organization that focus on mechanisms of social organization and integration (Iannone 2002). In these models, ancient Mesoamerican polities are viewed as integrated and cohesive social formations. Recent debate, particularly in the Maya Lowlands, has focused on whether polities were organized in a centralized or decentralized fashion (e.g., Fox et al. 1996; Iannone 2002). Centralized or unitary states are organized and integrated through



7.1 The lower Río Verde Valley, Oaxaca, showing sites mentioned in the text.

defining a suite of diagnostic ceramic styles for the Early Postclassic, coupled with relatively few radiocarbon dates, have made it difficult for archaeologists to identify sites from this period (Kowalewski et al. 1989:251–254; Lind 1991–1992; Winter 1994), although research by Martínez, Markens, and Winter is beginning to resolve this problem (Chapter 2). Debates over basic questions of chronology have led to widely divergent arguments about the Classic to Postclassic transition, ranging from massive depopulation to political fragmentation with relatively little change in overall population (Chapters 1 and 12).

In this chapter, I address the Classic to Postclassic transition in Oaxaca by examining the Classic period collapse in the lower Río Verde Valley on Oaxaca's western Pacific Coast (Figure 7.1).<sup>1</sup> Recent research in the lower Verde has clarified the nature of demographic and sociopolitical change at this time (Joyce et al.

a centralized bureaucratic state system characterized by a great degree of administrative control over economic, military, and religious matters. Centralized polities are generally seen as larger in territory and population than decentralized ones and are characterized by an endogamous class system. In the decentralized model social integration is achieved largely through kinship and religious practices with rulers as lineage heads. Polities consist of a number of functionally redundant kinship-based units that unite or split apart depending on social conditions, particularly the presence of external threats. In the decentralized model the core political units therefore are kinship groups, usually viewed as lineages, which unite to form larger states that are led by kings who act as ritualists, politicians, and marriage brokers to forge tenuous and often temporary alliances of the social segments. Decentralized states are not characterized by the bureaucracies and large standing armies, often mentioned as features of centralized polities.

Debates over Mesoamerican social organization are increasingly moving toward a middle ground between these two positions that recognizes a continuum in social organization from strongly centralized to decentralized (Iannone 2002; Marcus 1993, 1998). Marcus (1993, 1998) has attempted to integrate both the centralized and decentralized positions through her dynamic model, which argues that complex polities cycle historically between larger-scale and smaller-scale polities. The unification and dissolution of polities are seen as "different stages in the dynamic cycles of the same state" and thus are characteristic of the cultural evolution of complex societies (Marcus 1998:92). The main causes of state cycling are seen as interstate competition and the recognition that "large-scale, asymmetrical, and inequitarian structures were more fragile and unstable than commonly assumed" (Marcus 1998:94).

Despite the increasing recognition of the dynamism of prehispanic polities, approaches to social organization and political history continue to focus on overarching social and political structures. The decentralized and dynamic models recognize some inherent societal tensions, at least in the larger political formations of the pre-Columbian world, particularly between the institutions of kinship and kingship (see Fox et al. 1996; Iannone 2002). These models, however, continue to focus on the long-term stability, coherence, and integration of large-scale political units, whether the lineage in the decentralized model or the state in the centralized model. The dynamic model further argues that political cycling is part of the inherent structure of complex political systems.

Instead of focusing on the nature of sociopolitical structures, in this chapter I will begin with Marcus's (1998) recognition of the fragility and instability of centralized political systems by exploring social contradictions and tensions that were inherent in the ongoing social relations that constituted the centralized political systems of the lower Rio Verde Valley. Rather than representing the end of a long

period of stable and uncontested political relations dominated by the nobility—whether viewed as cyclical, centralized, or decentralized—I argue that the Classic period collapse in the lower Rio Verde Valley appears more like an outcome of the negotiation of social contradictions and tensions that were inherent in the production of complex political systems.

Poststructural theory argues that political formations including complex societies are instantiations of ongoing social relations simultaneously embedded in and both producing and reproducing historical traditions (e.g., Giddens 1979, 1984; Paukert 2001). Rather than integrated and coherent, social systems are fragmented and contested to varying degrees such that there is never complete closure in any system of domination. By "social negotiation" I mean that the practices that constitute sociopolitical systems are always negotiations among differently positioned actors characterized by varying identities, interests, emotions, knowledge, outlooks, and dispositions. Political formations therefore are never integrated wholes as represented in most approaches to social organization in Mesoamerican archaeology (see Iannone 2002) but always contain polyvalent and potentially contestable symbols, meanings, actions, and institutions. Political formations therefore are historically constituted through the ongoing interaction of people of different social positions, such as nobles and commoners, women and men, urban and rural dwellers, and people of the core and periphery. Political systems, including ruling ideologies and institutions, are not simple reflections of elite interests imposed on subordinates. The outcome of the negotiation of power may bolster the social position of nobles, but it usually does so in ways that reflect some degree of compromise resulting from the interactions of varied social actors. Subordinates always have some degree of penetration of domination, which can be actualized by engaging with elites in ways that affect systems of domination, by seeking independence from institutions and practices of domination or by opposing domination through resistance (Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and Weller 2007; Scott 1990). I argue that archaeologists need to move away from the structuralist societal typologies that have dominated research on political relations in the past. Instead, archaeologists need to better problematize ancient political formations by recognizing that all people, including commoners as well as nobles, contributed to the ongoing production and reproduction of political life in ancient Mesoamerican societies.

## FORMATIVE-CLASSIC PERIOD POLITICAL CENTRALIZATION AND COLLAPSE

Survey and excavation indicate that the lower Verde began a gradual trend toward political centralization in the Middle Formative (700–400 BCE), which culminated in the Terminal Formative (150 BCE–250 CE) with the emergence of a

regional polity with its capital at the urban center of Río Viejo (Barber 2005; Joyce 2003). From 700 BCE until the end of the Formative at ca. 250 CE, population increased greatly as measured by the occupational area in the full-coverage survey. Social complexity also increased as measured by the regional settlement hierarchy, mortuary patterns, residential data, and an increase in the scale of public ceremonies and the construction of monumental buildings (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 1991a, 1991b, 2003, 2005, 2006; Workinger 2002). The first political center to develop in the region was at Charco Redondo, which grew to sixty-two hectares by the Middle Formative. By the Late Formative period (400–150 BCE), Charco Redondo had grown to seventy hectares, while a second perhaps competing regional center emerged at San Francisco de Arriba, which reached ninety-five hectares. Regional data indicate the development of a three-tiered settlement hierarchy, hereditary social inequality, ritual feasting, communal mortuary ceremonialism, and construction of monumental buildings by the Late Formative. Material expressions of social inequality were restrained, however, and practices such as feasting, public mortuary ceremony in community cemeteries, and the construction of public buildings reproduced and made salient local community identities.

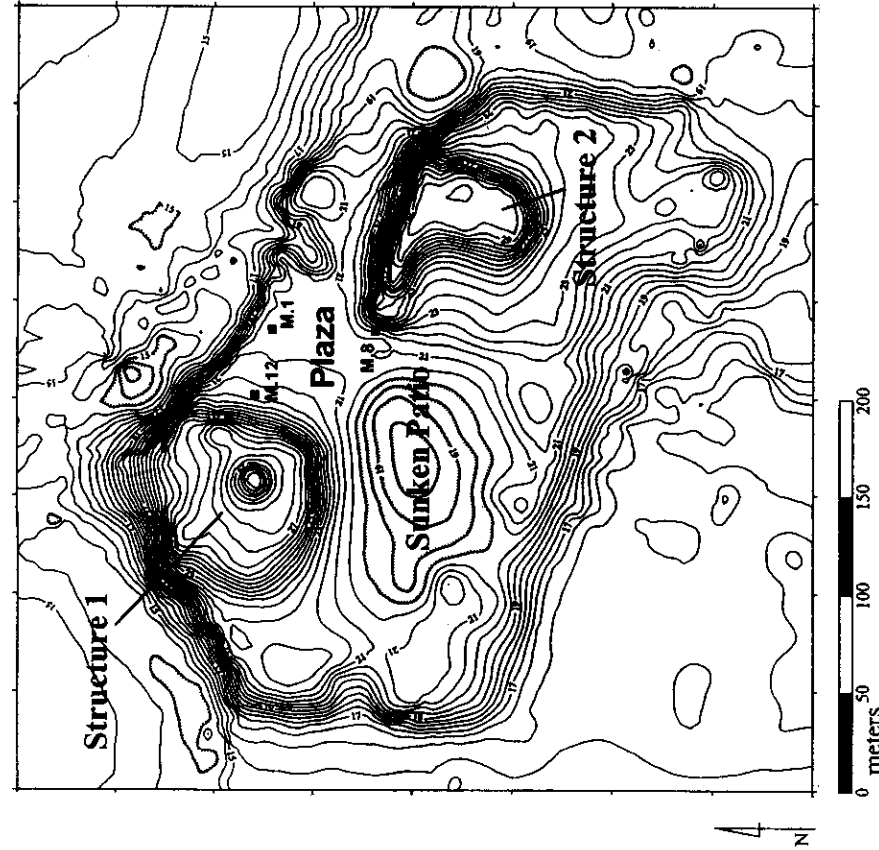
Formative period political centralization culminated during the Terminal Formative with the emergence of an urban center at Río Viejo, which was the capital of a polity that probably incorporated people throughout the entire lower Río Verde region (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2003, 2005). Río Viejo increased in size from 25 hectares in the Late Formative to 225 hectares by the early Terminal Formative (150 BCE–100 CE), when it was the primary center of a five-tiered settlement hierarchy. As argued by Barber and Joyce (2007), the development of a regional-scale political formation during the Terminal Formative appears to have been the result of the “scaling up” of communal practices. At the same time, practices that reproduced local community identity persisted. Terminal Formative political relations resemble what Blanton (1998) terms a “corporate pattern,” where the exclusionary power of nobles is restricted by a discourse that limits self-aggrandizing impulses of leaders.

During the Terminal Formative, feasting, caching, and mortuary rituals continued to reproduce community identity (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007). Levine’s (2002) analysis of early Terminal Formative ceramics shows a significant increase in the proportion of fancy serving vessels in non-elite ceramic inventories, perhaps indicative of an increase in ritual feasting. At Yügüe, Barber (2005) has found evidence of communal feasting from Terminal Formative midden deposits in public settings. Evidence for the repetitive use of community ceremonial spaces was recovered at both Yügüe and San Francisco de Arriba in the form of ritual caches used to dedicate the construction of public buildings. The most elaborate cache was excavated by Workinger (2002) and included over 500 artifacts of greenstone, rock

crystal, iron ore, and pottery. The use of communal cemeteries continued, as shown by Barber’s (2005) excavations of a late Terminal Formative cemetery at Yügüe. The excavations recovered the remains of at least forty individuals, both male and female and of varying status levels and ages, buried within a public platform. The repetitive use of the cemetery would have reproduced community identity by referencing community history and reaffirming communal affiliations. The dense placement of burials in the Yügüe cemetery as well as the frequent disturbance and movement of the bones of earlier interments by later ones can be interpreted as an assertion of the collective and a denial of the individual and perhaps of differences among individuals (see Shanks and Tilley 1982). Similar collective mortuary practices were found with a Late Formative cemetery at the site of Cerro de la Cruz (Joyce 1991a).

Social inequality increased during the Terminal Formative as indicated by mortuary patterns, caches, residential evidence, and monumental buildings (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2005, 2006). Although most people interred in the Yügüe cemetery were accompanied by few or no offerings, a high-status burial was recovered consisting of a late adolescent male wearing a plaster-backed iron-ore pectoral, probably a mirror, and holding an intricately incised bone flute made from a deer femur. The instrument is the most elaborate flute yet recovered for Terminal Formative Mesoamerica and its incised imagery depicts a skeletal male speaking or inhaling (Barber 2005). Luxury goods like iron ore and greenstone, recovered in caches and as burial offerings, were obtained through networks of interregional exchange among Mesoamerican nobles (Hirth 1984; Joyce 1993). These exchange networks would have linked nobles in the lower Río Verde Valley to elites in other parts of Mesoamerica, contributing to the formation of a distinctive noble identity. In addition to the high-status burial at Yügüe, evidence for increasing social inequality comes from the excavation of a high-status residence at the site of Cerro de la Virgen (Barber 2005). This residence was larger and more elaborate than typical houses of the Oaxacan Formative and was spatially associated with a monumental public plaza.

Beyond the local level, the scale of monumental architecture built during the Terminal Formative indicates the production of supra-community affiliations in some cases probably engaging people within the entire region (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2003, 2005). Major communal works projects, including the construction of residential and “mixed-use” platforms as well as public buildings, were carried out at Río Viejo and at second-order and third-order sites in the lower Verde region, such as Charco Redondo, San Francisco de Arriba, and Yügüe (Barber 2005; Levine et al. 2004; Workinger 2002). The scale of monumental construction was considerable even at some lower order sites. For example, at the ten-hectare third-order site of Yügüe, people built a mixed-use platform measuring approximately 300 meters by 200 meters and reaching 10 meters at its highest point. Survey



7.2 The Mound 1 acropolis at Río Viejo.

and excavation at Yugué indicate that except for two ceremonial structures at the summit of the platform, activities and architecture on the mound were residential (Barber 2005; Joyce 1999). The total volume for the platform at Yugué is estimated at 94,000 to 100,000 cubic meters, demonstrating the scale of labor mobilization required for its construction.

The largest of the monumental buildings was the Mound 1 acropolis at Río Viejo (Figure 7.2), which with an estimated volume of 395,000 cubic meters was one of the largest structures in prehispanic Oaxaca (Joyce 2006; Levine et al. 2004). The platform supports two large substructures. Excavations in Structure 2, the eastern substructure on the acropolis, exposed an area of 242 cubic meters and penetrated in places to a depth of 3.2 meters below the current surface of the mound (Joyce 2003, 2006; Joyce et al. 2001). Although the presence of occasional early

Terminal Formative sherds incidentally incorporated in construction fill leaves open the possibility of an earlier building phase, the excavation data indicate the construction of a single late Terminal Formative (100–250 CE) structure. At that time, Structure 2 consisted of a large stepped platform constructed of adobe blocks and rising approximately fourteen meters above the floodplain. On the summit of the platform, excavations revealed remnants of a poorly preserved adobe building (Joyce 2006). The recovery of pieces of faced stucco that apparently covered portions of the building as well as one piece of painted adobe indicates that it was an architecturally elaborate building. The low density of artifacts and lack of domestic debris indicate that the structure was a public building.

The scale and architectural elaboration of Structure 2 indicate that the acropolis was the civic-ceremonial center of Río Viejo during the late Terminal Formative. The participation of commoners in the construction of the civic-ceremonial center as well as the rituals carried out there, would have contributed to the creation of a new corporate identity centered on the symbols, institutions, and rulers at Río Viejo. Monumental buildings like Río Viejo's acropolis were also visible for great distances so that their power as sacred mountains and political centers would have been present in the everyday lived experiences of people throughout the region. Ritual feasting, perhaps associated with monument construction, was another communal activity that may have engaged large groups of people in ways that contributed to the social production of a larger-scale corporate identity.

Despite the evidence for increasing social inequality and the development of political affiliations and identities at the regional scale, public social practices appear to have continued to materialize social relations as corporate while restraining the expression of noble status (see Barber and Joyce 2007 for an extended discussion). For example, luxury goods obtained through long-distance exchange linked nobles in the lower Río Verde Valley to elites in other parts of Mesoamerica and contributed to the materialization of a noble identity. The use of socially valued goods in community rituals, particularly caches interred in public buildings, however, transformed these objects from prestige items that embodied high status into offerings that materialized corporate identities. Likewise, monumental buildings like Río Viejo's ceremonial center and the mixed-use and residential platforms at several sites were constructed with voluntary labor that would have materialized corporate action and identity as well as political authority. As argued by Barber and Joyce (2007:24): "Monumental architecture embedded regional political authority in place, creating a permanent and highly visible focus for collectivities tied to that authority. In the ritualized context of monument construction, labor became a practice of affiliation that connected regional populations with the physically and morally preeminent forces of regional political authority. Political authority thus was materialized as a scaled-up community." The more egalitarian, corporate,

and community-based traditions in the lower Verde therefore constrained the development of more exclusive, regional, and unequal forms of authority during the Terminal Formative. One result was that distinctions between nobles and commoners were not emphasized in public action. When political authority was materialized, such as in the construction of Río Viejo's acropolis or in the interment of the high-status person in the Yügüe cemetery, it was couched in a more traditional corporate and community-based discourse. Unlike later times in the lower Río Verde Valley (see below), Terminal Formative monumental construction was not accompanied by evidence for aggrandizing elites, such as rulers' portraits on carved stone monuments and cemeteries restricted to the nobility.

Although people in the lower Verde participated in practices that produced larger-scale political formations that can probably be described as a state, there undoubtedly were different degrees of compliance and involvement with unifying rulers, institutions, and practices (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2003). Terminal Formative social change would not have been driven simply by emerging elites or the new corporate structures of the Río Viejo polity. In addition to cooperative social practices such as the construction of monumental buildings and ritual performances, social change at this time was undoubtedly also an outcome of structural contradictions resulting in struggle, negotiation, and perhaps conflict. One likely point of tension was between the emerging institutions of rulership that were more unequal and regional in scope and the traditional structural principles that were relatively egalitarian and community-based. Both nobles and commoners were increasingly drawn away from traditional sites of social interaction tied to their local communities to participate in practices at the regional center of Río Viejo, including the construction of monumental buildings and large-scale public ritual performances. In addition, nobles were increasingly involved in wider interregional networks of exchange and interaction, which distanced themselves from commoners.

Social tensions surrounding the emerging regional forms of authority and identity are suggested by the mortuary data from the cemeteries at Yügüe and Cerro de la Cruz (Barber 2005; Joyce 1991a). As discussed above, most of the skeletons recovered in the cemeteries were interred in dense concentrations where individual bodies were often rearranged and piled together as a result of successive burial events, thereby losing their individuality and becoming incorporated into the social group at death. Some burials, however, especially high-status ones, were left as intact skeletons, suggesting a more restricted form of authority focused perhaps on individuals or particular kin groups and linked to emerging supra-community political institutions as symbolized, for example, by Río Viejo's acropolis. While the overall pattern of rulership at this time may appear to be corporate, it was not necessarily the result of a structural unity as implied in Blanton's (1998) model but was instead

in part an outcome of social negotiations between traditional communal authority and identity and the newer, more restricted and unequal forms of power.

The tension between traditional and centralized forms of authority could have been a factor contributing to the collapse of the Terminal Formative regional polity (Joyce 2003, 2006). At about 250 CE the elaborate public building on Structure 2 of Río Viejo's acropolis was abandoned. Burned adobes and floor areas suggest that the structure may have been destroyed by fire. The regional settlement data also indicate a dramatic disruption in regional sociopolitical organization. Río Viejo decreased in size from 200 hectares in the late Terminal Formative to 75 hectares in the Early Classic. Several other large Terminal Formative floodplain sites with mounded architecture, including Yügüe, declined significantly in size or were abandoned. The regional settlement hierarchy declined from five to four levels and there is a shift in settlement from the floodplain into the piedmont, perhaps for defense. During the Early Classic (250–500 CE), the region contained as many as eight first-order centers of roughly equivalent size. There is little evidence for monumental building activities. The impression is that the lower Verde region was characterized by multiple and perhaps competing polities. The scale of political control was far reduced from the Terminal Formative when Río Viejo was the single dominant center in the region and from the Late Formative when two first-order centers were present.

Early Classic burials at Río Viejo occur most often as individual interments and there is no evidence of the dense cemeteries of the Formative (Christensen 1999; Joyce 1991a). Two high-status burials have been recovered with offerings of up to twenty-nine ceramic vessels as well as greenstone, shell, and obsidian artifacts (Joyce 1991a:779, 784). The data suggest that Early Classic social organization involved a decrease in the scale of political control, but with more restricted forms of authority. These data suggest that nobles were more successful in consolidating power, developing new forms of rulership within smaller, more traditional community-level scales of control.

At present, the causes of the Early Classic political collapse in the lower Río Verde Valley are only beginning to be investigated. One factor may have been interaction with the powerful Central Mexican state of Teotihuacan (Joyce 2003). Another factor in the collapse, however, could have been social tension over divergent ideologies and forms of authority, leading to the rejection of rulers and ruling institutions by local elites and commoners. One plausible scenario is that the construction of the acropolis was an attempt by Río Viejo's rulers to consolidate regional political authority, which instead became a spark that triggered the rejection of the polity and the resulting political fragmentation of the Early Classic period. It is intriguing that following its abandonment, Structure 2 on the acropolis at Río Viejo lay exposed to the elements for 250 years, resulting in erosion and

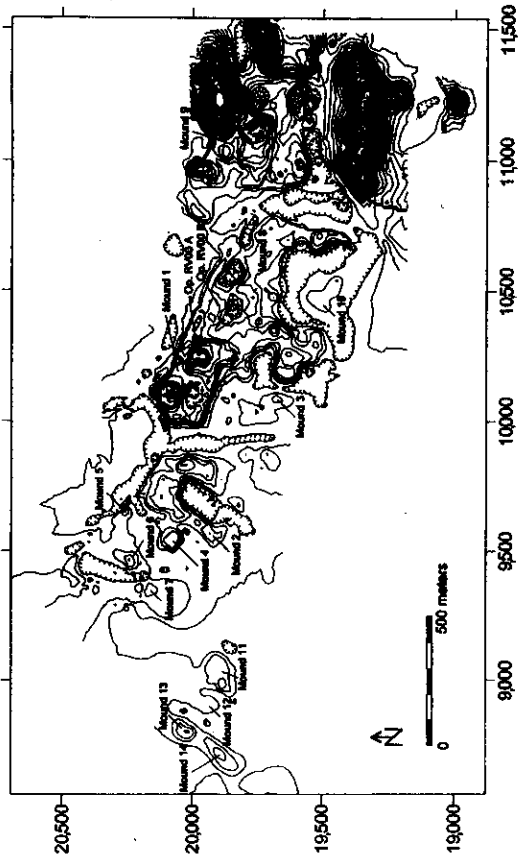
further disintegration of the building. The ruins of the acropolis would have persisted through the Early Classic as a reminder of the people, institutions, and ideas that sponsored its construction during the Terminal Formative. Based on current data, the acropolis was not reoccupied until the Late Classic during a second period of political centralization.

### LATE CLASSIC CENTRALIZATION

The data from the lower Río Verde Valley show that the political fragmentation of the Early Classic was followed in the Late Classic period by population nucleation and political centralization with the regional capital once again situated at Río Viejo (Joyce et al. 2001). The Río Viejo polity shared many features with other centralized polities of Late Classic Mesoamerica, including urbanism, monumental art and architecture, writing, the institution of kingship, craft specialization, and a settlement hierarchy with at least four levels. Río Viejo was one of the largest and most powerful polities in Late Classic Oaxaca.

Late Classic settlement in the full-coverage survey zone consisted of fifty sites, covering 605 hectares. Settlement shifted back toward the floodplain with the occupational area recorded there increasing from 22 percent in the Early Classic to 56 percent by the Late Classic. A seven-tiered settlement hierarchy developed during the Late Classic based on site size, volume of mounded architecture, and the presence/absence of carved stone monuments. Río Viejo was the first-order capital of a regional polity given its large size, monumental architecture, and numerous carved stone monuments. In the current settlement model, second-order sites like Charco Redondo and San Francisco de Arriba range from 52 to 58 hectares and have impressive monumental buildings and carved stones. Third-order sites range in size from 26 to 33 hectares and include Tututepec and Cerro del Chivo within the full-coverage zone and probably La Humedad and La Huichicara outside of the systematic survey. All of the third-order centers have monumental architecture and carved stones. Fourth-order sites range from 10 to 15 hectares, fifth-order sites range from 5 to 9 hectares, sixth-order sites from 2 to 4 hectares, and seventh-tier sites are less than 2 hectares; these sites never have carved stones and rarely include mounded architecture.

By the Late Classic, Río Viejo had grown to its maximum area of 250 hectares and was the capital of a complex polity that dominated the lower Verde (Figure 7.3). Much of the site was artificially raised above the floodplain by a series of large residential and multi-use platforms. All of the platform mounds mapped at Río Viejo have Late Classic occupations, although most of them included redeposited pottery from earlier periods. Mounds 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, and 14 appear to have been large residential platforms based on the presence of building foundations visible on the



7.3 Plan of Río Viejo showing mounds and 2,000 excavation areas.

surface along with numerous *manos*, *metates*, and utilitarian pottery. Mounds 2, 8, 9, and 11 also supported large structures, probably public buildings, and so should be considered multi-use platforms.

Río Viejo's acropolis was reoccupied during the Late Classic and once again became the site's civic-ceremonial center. Evidence that Mound 1 was a locus of important public ceremonies, and probably the ruler's residence, includes the presence of three Late Classic carved stone monuments depicting rulers (Urcid and Joyce 2001), a plaza spatially situated for large public gatherings, and a sunken patio probably for elite-restricted activities. A test excavation fifty meters south of Mound 1 recovered thick deposits of Late Classic sherds from fancy serving vessels, suggesting elite domestic activities or perhaps feasting (Joyce 1991a:480). Excavations on Structure 2 exposed Late Classic building foundations, although they were very poorly preserved because of the reuse of foundation stones during the Early Postclassic. Excavation and surface collections suggest that the entire acropolis was occupied during the Late Classic.

Although the Late Classic saw the return of centralized rulership in the lower Río Verde Valley, evidence indicates that the nature of political authority varied from the previous period of centralization during the Terminal Formative. The Río Viejo polity no longer was characterized by the corporate political organization and communal building projects that occurred during the Terminal Formative. Excavations at Río Viejo and San Francisco de Arriba indicate that rather than large-scale building projects, construction of monumental public buildings during the Late Classic

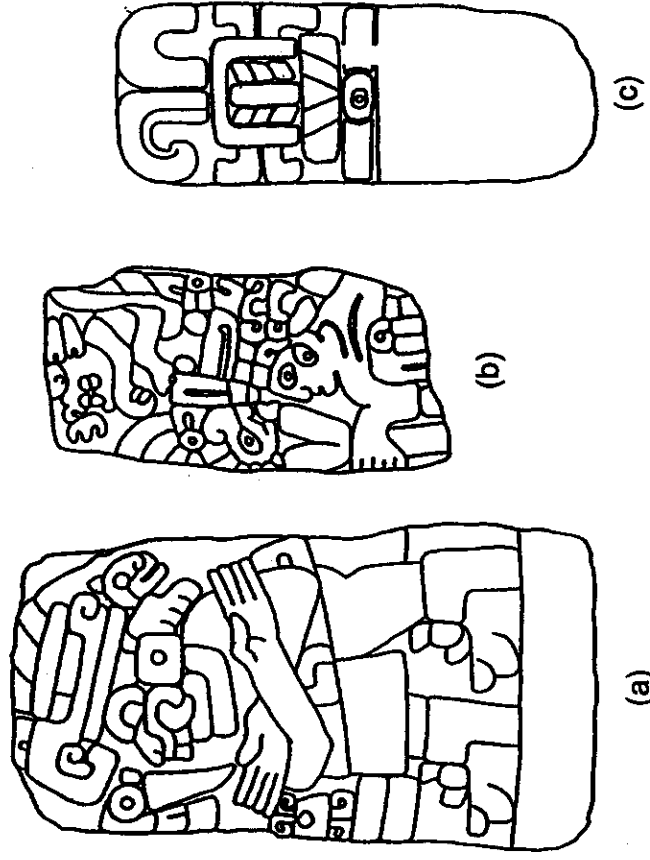


involved only minor renovations of earlier structures that would not have required large labor forces (Joyce 1999, 2006; Workinger 2002:96–237). For example, Structure 2 on the acropolis was rebuilt by laying down a 0.6-meter-thick deposit of fill over the ruins of the Terminal Formative building and then constructing another building on this surface, this time with a stone foundation and perishable walls.

Iconography from Late Classic carved stone monuments in the lower Río Verde Valley suggests a more exclusionary form of political power legitimated through the aggrandizement of individual rulers, their ancestors, and their place in the line of dynastic succession. A total of thirteen carved stone monuments have been dated stylistically to the Late Classic at Río Viejo (Urcid and Joyce 2001). They are carved in low relief and are made of the local granite. Many of the carved stones depict nobles, probably rulers of Río Viejo, dressed in elaborate costumes and sometimes accompanied by a glyph that represents their name in the 260-day ritual calendar (Figure 7.4). For example, Río Viejo Monument 8 located on the acropolis, depicts a noble wearing an elaborate buccal mask with prominent fangs and earpools. To the left of the figure is the individual's hieroglyphic name, 10 Eye. Human sacrifice and bloodletting are referred to on several monuments. In addition to actual depictions of rulers, two carved stones (Monuments 1 and 14) each include only a single glyph, which we hypothesize to be the calendrical name of a ruler. Carved stone monuments at second-order and third-order sites are similar in style to those from Río Viejo and include either depictions of nobles or stones with only the hieroglyphic names of rulers (Jorrín 1974; Urcid and Joyce 2001; Workinger 2002). The nobles referred to on these monuments may be local rulers or members of Río Viejo's ruling dynasty.

The aggrandizement of nobles as well as their physical and symbolic separation from commoners is indicated by data from the hilltop ceremonial site of Cerro de los Tepalcates. Cerro de los Tepalcates is located on a rocky hill overlooking the coastal lagoons. Survey of the site recovered few sherds and no evidence for terraces or building foundations typically visible on hilltop sites in the region. At Cerro de los Tepalcates, hieroglyphic inscriptions are carved into boulders. The inscriptions appear to be calendrical names of nobles. The names often occur in pairs, suggesting that they may represent marital pairs. The site also included a probable looted tomb. Since no tombs have been discovered elsewhere in the region, these data suggest that lower Verde rulers may not have been interred in their communities but rather in cemeteries associated with sacred non-residential sites.

Although few Late Classic burials have been excavated in the lower Verde, the data suggest that like the Early Classic, commoners were buried as individuals or in small family groups near their houses (Christensen 1999) rather than in communal cemeteries as had been done during the Formative. Burials of non-elites have been found in residential settings usually without offerings or accompanied by a small

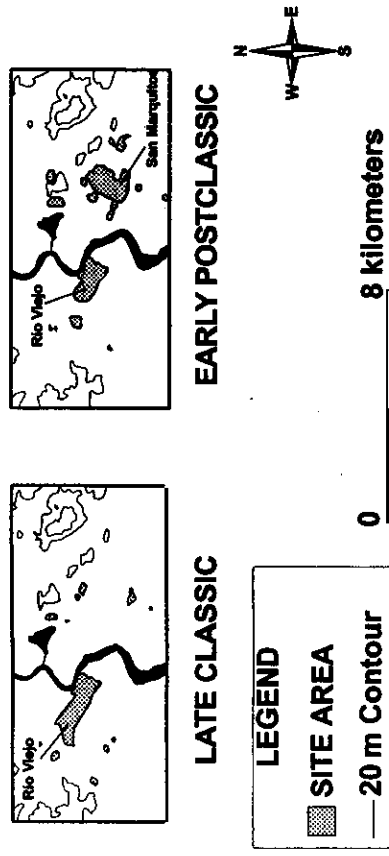


7.4 Late Classic carved stone monuments from Río Viejo: a=Monument 8; b=Monument 14; c=Monument 1. Drawn by Javier Urcid.

number of ceramic vessels, although an adult burial recovered from Mound 7 at Río Viejo was interred with three ceramic vessels, two ground-stone axes, a shell necklace consisting of sixty-nine beads, two bone pendants, two pieces of worked bone, one greenstone bead, and a piece of worked granite (Workinger and Joyce 1999:96–97). Based on the available data, commoners were primarily farmers who lived in modest wattle-and-daub houses, although evidence for specialized production of grayware pottery comes from a test excavation and surface collections on Mound 4 at Río Viejo. Future research in the lower Río Verde Valley needs to explore more fully the dimensions of social difference and identity beyond noble and commoner distinctions and how these differences were implicated in social negotiation and transformation.

The data from the lower Verde indicate a return to centralized political authority during the Late Classic with the reemergence of Río Viejo as the dominant center in the region. In contrast to the Terminal Formative, however, commoners seem to have been less involved in large-scale projects such as the construction of public buildings. Although lower Verde nobles expressed their power in monumental art and architecture, the focus on individual rulers in monumental art and the decrease in public building projects suggest a less communal, more exclusionary ideology



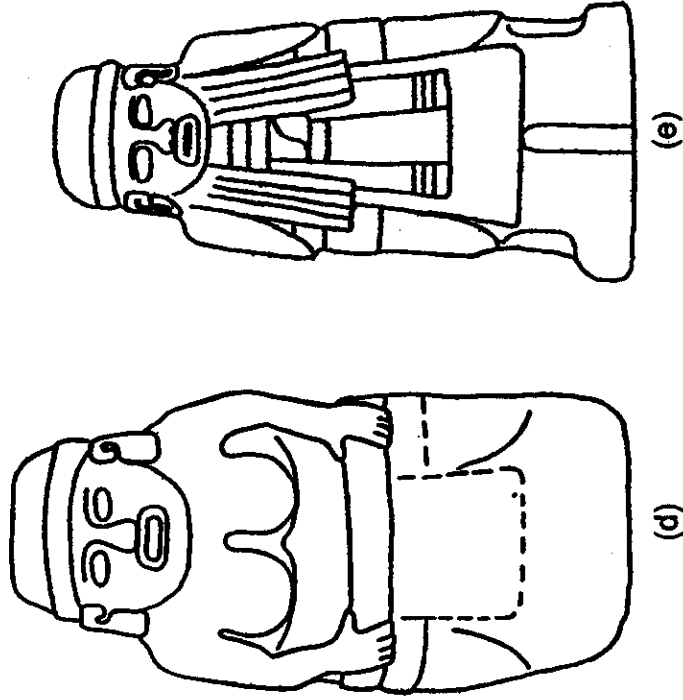


7.5 *Late Classic to Early Postclassic settlement change in the area of Río Viejo.*

(Joyce 2006; Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and Weller 2007). Commoners may have been less actively engaged in the kinds of dramatic ritual performances and shared experiences that created a sense of belonging and identity with the polity, including its rulers, ruling institutions, and symbols (Kertzner 1988). At present, we have little evidence for the nature of Late Classic social negotiations or tensions, although data from the Early Postclassic suggest that there may have been a hidden transcript of commoner resistance that only became public once the Río Viejo polity, and its coercive powers, had collapsed (Joyce et al. 2001).

### THE CLASSIC PERIOD COLLAPSE

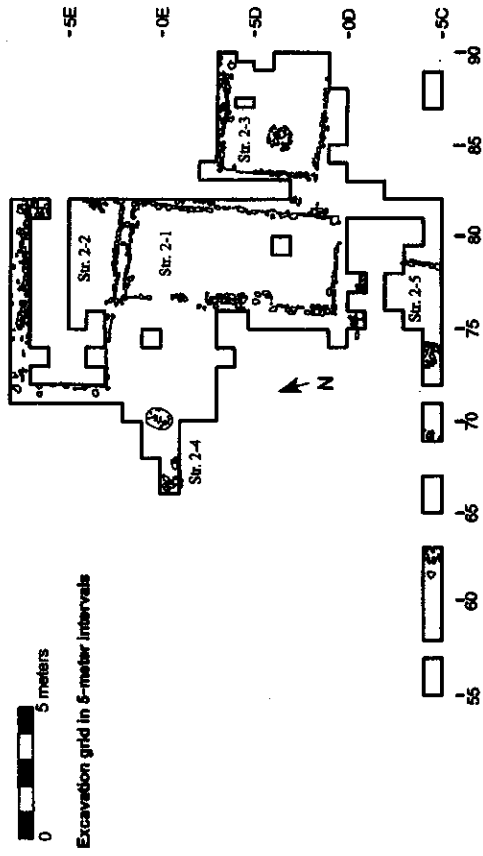
The Late Classic period polity centered at Río Viejo collapsed during the Early Postclassic period (Joyce et al. 2001). The data indicate that a major change in settlement patterns and sociopolitical organization occurred during the Early Postclassic. Regional settlement as measured by the occupational area in the full-coverage survey zone decreased from 605 hectares in the Late Classic to 452 hectares in the Early Postclassic, while the settlement hierarchy decreased from seven to four levels. Río Viejo continued as a first-order center, although settlement at the site declined from 250 to 140 hectares (Figure 7.5).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, another first-order center emerged at San Marquitos, which grew from 7 hectares in the Late Classic to 191 hectares in the Early Postclassic.<sup>3</sup> In the Early Postclassic, second-order sites range from 10 to 21 hectares, third-order sites from 2 to 5 hectares, and fourth-order sites are 1 hectare or less. Regional settlement shifted back toward the piedmont with 62 percent of the occupational area in the full-coverage survey located there, versus only 34 percent during the Late Classic. Excavation and survey have found no evidence for the construction of monumental architecture at Río Viejo and



7.6 *Early Postclassic carved stones at Río Viejo: a=Monument 3; b=Jamiltepec Monument 1. Drawn by Javier Urquid.*

other sites during the Early Postclassic. The architectural data indicate a cessation of the construction of monumental buildings to house rulers and politico-religious institutions.

The lack of monumental building activities is mirrored in a reduction in monumental art with only three stone monuments recorded at Río Viejo (Figure 7.6) that are tentatively dated stylistically to the Early Postclassic; all of these are sculptures as opposed to flat stelae and orthostats (Urquid and Joyce 2001).<sup>4</sup> The iconography and location of the monuments indicate a shift away from expressions of aggrandizement and dominance in the portrayal of important personages. Early Postclassic sculptures were highly visible and accessible since they were located on a natural hill on the southeastern end of the site as opposed to locations on public buildings or multi-use platforms where Late Classic carved stones were placed. Late Classic monuments depicted individual rulers shown with elaborate elements of royal dress—such as jaguar headdresses and masks, staves of office, and other aspects of personal adornment—and in many cases with their hieroglyphic names and allusions to important rites like sacrifice. The Early Postclassic sculptures depict



7.7 Plan of Op. RV00 A excavations, Río Viejo, Oaxaca.

personages that lack the glyphs and elaborate ornamentation of the Late Classic carved stones. For example, Monument 3 clearly depicts a topless female wearing a skirt, or *posabuanco*, in the traditional style of the Oaxaca Coast. Urcid and Joyce (2001) suggest that the Early Postclassic stone monuments depict deities, although they cannot rule out living nobles or noble ancestors.

Large-scale horizontal excavations exposed two areas of Río Viejo with the remains of Early Postclassic residences (Operations RV00 A and RV00 B; Joyce 2006; Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and King 2001; King 2003). Op. RV00 A cleared 242 square meters on Mound 1—Structure 2, the eastern portion of the acropolis (Figure 7.7). Two structures were completely exposed as well as portions of three others. Op. RV00 B exposed portions of seven structures on Mound 8, approximately 180 meters southeast of the acropolis. The Postclassic structures in both operations were low platforms, approximately 0.5 meter high, and supported wattle-and-daub superstructures. The excavations yielded burials along with artifacts, features, and refuse that demonstrate the domestic function of these buildings. The size and form of the buildings in the two areas were virtually identical and the relatively modest architecture and burial offerings indicate commoner status. Dozens of similar structures have been observed on the surface over a broad area of Mound 8 (Joyce and King 2001; King 2003). Survey and test excavations throughout Río Viejo have not recovered material indications of significant wealth distinctions relative to the residences exposed in Ops. RV00 A and RV00 B. The excavations at Río Viejo along with the regional survey data suggest little variation in wealth and power during the Early Postclassic.

The Op. RV00 A excavations show that by the Early Postclassic, the acropolis was no longer the civic-ceremonial center of the site but instead was a locus of commoner residences. The five low platforms excavated on Structure 2 were densely packed, often with less than two meters separating structures. The stones used to construct the platforms were obtained by dismantling the foundations of the Late Classic public building on Structure 2. The deposits that overlay occupational surfaces included concentrations of unfired daub from the decay of wattle-and-daub superstructures. Three primary burials were recovered adjacent to the southwestern corners of two of the structures. Two burials, each containing a single child without offerings, were excavated outside of the southwest corner of Structure 2-1. A flexed burial of an adult male without offerings was excavated beneath the occupational surface immediately outside of the southwestern corner of Structure 2-3.

Midden deposits were excavated from two areas of Op. RV00 A (Joyce et al. 2001). One midden was exposed in the one-meter-wide passage between Structure 2-5 and Structure 2-1 and yielded a radiocarbon date from charcoal of  $997 \pm 47$  bp, or 953 CE (AA37669). Early Postclassic refuse was also used for fill in Structure 2-5, which is stratigraphically earlier than the midden in the passageway, showing that the Early Postclassic domestic occupation of Structure 2 began prior to the mid-tenth century (uncorrected). Artifacts associated with the Early Postclassic occupation on Mound 1—Structure 2, especially those from the middens, confirm the domestic use of this area. Typical Mesoamerican domestic items included obsidian blades, cores, and debitage; ground-stone axes; hammerstones; mano and metate fragments; chert projectile points and debitage; heat-altered rock; animal bone; shell; charred plant remains; ceramic sherds, figurines, whistles, earflares, stamps, and spindle whorls; bone needles; and carved bone. These data suggest activities such as processing and consumption of food, working of lithics, manufacturing textiles, and performance of household rituals. Imported goods associated with the residences included greenstone beads, a turquoise pendant, obsidian, pumice, possible non-local ceramics, and fragments of at least two alabaster bowls. Since Structure 2 had been the location of public buildings during the Terminal Formative and Late Classic, it is possible that some of these luxury goods were imported into the region prior to the Early Postclassic. A similar set of domestic artifacts and imported goods was recovered from residences excavated in Op. RV00 B on Mound 8, 180 meters southeast of the acropolis (Joyce and King 2001; King 2003; Chapter 8). Overall, the data suggest relatively little variation in social status and roles between the two areas where Early Postclassic residences were excavated. Although the inhabitants of these residences had access to a variety of local and imported prestige goods, the relatively modest architecture and burial offerings indicate commoner status.

Three of the platforms excavated in Op. RV00 A surrounded a patio (Mound 1—Structures 2-1, 2-2, and 2-4). A worked monumental stone measuring 1.42

meter by 1.09 meter by 0.48 was found lying on the surface of the patio; the stone resembles a probable Late Classic altar found on the plaza beneath Structure 2. The upper surface of the stone exhibited fifteen ground or pecked depressions similar to depressions observed on other worked monumental stones and unworked boulders at the site (Urcid and Joyce 2001:205–208). The function of stones like this one is unclear. As discussed by Joyce and his colleagues (2001:358–359), they may have been milling stones or could have had a ceremonial purpose.

A multiple burial was interred beneath the surface of the patio with evidence of an unusual mortuary ritual relative to other Early Postclassic burials (Joyce et al. 2001). The burial included two individuals placed in a pit partially lined with uncut stones; neither was accompanied by offerings. One interment was a secondary burial of an adult male accompanied by red pigment and with several bones exhibiting cut marks, possibly due to a violent death or postmortem preparation of the body (Urcid 2000). The fill in the burial pit also included ash and charcoal indicative of burning. The second individual was a primary interment of an adult female. She was seated and tightly flexed, probably indicative of a bundle burial, and placed directly on top of the first individual. After the burial was covered with sediment, a fire was set over the grave, leaving a layer of burned earth. The mortuary ceremony therefore involved the burial of an adult female probably accompanied by a male ancestor or possibly a sacrificial victim. The data indicate that the mortuary ritual was a restricted household ceremony since it was carried out in a small, enclosed patio space of a residence, although the broader significance of this unusual burial is unclear. The size and form of the Early Postclassic residential structures as well as the associated artifact assemblage and the other burials recovered on Structure 2 do not suggest significant status differences between this domestic unit and the one on Mound 8 east of the acropolis, so it would be difficult to interpret the burial as high status. It is possible that the multiple interment involved a primary female burial accompanied by the reburial of an ancestor removed from another location, since Structure 2 was not a residential area in the Late Classic. The interment could have been part of a termination ceremony desacralizing the acropolis (Kunen et al. 2002; Mock 1998).

The presence of commoner residences on the acropolis shows that Early Postclassic people did not treat the earlier spaces, objects, and buildings associated with rulership with the same reverence they had been afforded in the Late Classic and before (Joyce et al. 2001). During the Late Classic, the acropolis with its public buildings, plaza, sunken patio, and carved stone portraits of rulers was a monument expressing the sacred authority and political power of the nobility. By the Early Postclassic, the occupation of the acropolis by commoners and the dismantling of public buildings for reuse as foundation stones to construct their residences suggest the active denigration of earlier symbols of rulers and ruling institutions.

A more dramatic example of the disjunction between Late Classic and Early Postclassic political discourse is marked by the discovery of a fragment of a Late Classic carved stone monument (Río Viejo Monument 17) reutilized in an Early Postclassic structure wall excavated in Op. RV00 B (Joyce and King 2001; King 2003). The carved stone depicted an elite individual with an elaborate feathered headdress. Prior to its placement in the wall of a commoner residence, this monument had first been broken and then reutilized as a metate. At least four other Classic period carved stones were also reset in walls during terminal, presumably Early Postclassic, construction phases (Urcid and Joyce 2001:201–205). The ground or pecked depressions on the monumental stone recovered in the Early Postclassic residential patio may also represent another example of a utilitarian reuse and symbolic denigration of a Late Classic stone monument, in this case an altar.

Elsewhere in Mesoamerica evidence for the reoccupation of civic-ceremonial centers as well as the reuse and/or destruction of elite art and architecture in the years following the collapse has often been explained as the opportunistic actions of “squatters” (e.g., Culbert 1988:74; Harrison 1999:192–199; Pendergast 1979:183, 199), resulting in a functional change from elite public uses to non-elite residential ones. This view is incomplete in that it assumes that the commoners who reoccupied site centers were unaware of their history or of the ruling ideas and institutions of their immediate ancestors. A view of commoners as people without history or social memory is in sharp contrast to recent arguments concerning practices of Mesoamerican nobles. It is generally accepted by Mesoamerican scholars that acts of destruction and “termination” by nobles should be interpreted as desecrations of defeated regimes, whether deposed political factions or external enemies (Mock 1998). If nobles were aware of the ruling ideas and institutions of their predecessors, common people should also have had a similar awareness of their immediate past. As cogently argued by Hamann (2002, Chapter 4), Mesoamerican peoples, commoners as well as nobles, exhibited historical continuities in meaning and symbolism for hundreds and even thousands of years despite historical ruptures, including the Spanish Conquest (also see R. Joyce 2000; Monaghan 1990). In the case of the dismantling of public buildings and the reuse of a ruler’s portrait as a metate, I find it highly unlikely that only a few generations after the collapse of the Río Viejo polity the earlier meanings of these elite places, buildings, and portraits would have been lost and they would simply have been considered as convenient building materials. Even in cases where sites are reoccupied hundreds of years after abandonment, or by outsiders, the reuse or destruction of buildings and monuments would have involved meaningful acts (Chapter 4). To deny common people an understanding of their High Culture or its history is another example of the exclusion of commoners as significant actors in Mesoamerican political history (see also Chapter 4; Graham 2002:413–415; Robin 1999; Sheets 2000).

Another argument that denies historical consciousness to common people involves objections to the use of the category "commoner" to describe Early Postclassic social identity. Since current evidence indicates that inequalities in wealth and power were minimal, King (2003:353) argues that there were no "elites" and therefore use of the term "commoner" is also inappropriate. I argue that the category "commoner" is justified, however, by the historical relations embodied in tradition and social memory, which would have reflected centuries of living under conditions of hierarchical political systems. It is also likely that the immediate descendants of Late Classic noble families continued to embrace an identity as nobles during the Early Postclassic even if these families were no longer distinguished by unusual wealth or political power. In other words, commoner and noble identities were not just a product of the economic relations of the time but were the result of historical relations embodied in people's dispositions. Early Postclassic people in the lower Río Verde Valley also participated in networks of long-distance trade and inter-action (Chapter 8), which would have brought them into contact with powerful nobles in other parts of Mesoamerica (see Ringle et al. 1998).

The regional data indicate that the Classic period collapse most dramatically affected rulers, ruling institutions, and the dominant ideologies that legitimated their authority. Río Viejo, the Late Classic capital of the lower Verde polity, was in decline, with a decreasing population, a reduction in the erection of carved stone monuments, and a cessation in the construction of monumental architecture that housed rulers and ruling institutions. The data from the lower Verde not only indicate the collapse of ruling institutions but also the denigration by commoners of objects, symbols, spaces, and buildings associated with Late Classic rulership. At present, there are few data suggesting significant differences in wealth and political power during the Early Postclassic. Although rulers and political institutions were greatly affected by the collapse, the social changes of the Classic to Postclassic transition had a less severe impact on the lives of commoners (Joyce et al. 2001; King 2003). The survey data do not indicate a demographic collapse suggesting large-scale emigration or high mortality rates. Commoners living at Río Viejo in the Early Postclassic participated in a vibrant and diverse domestic economy, suggesting that they were freed from tributary burdens imposed by the nobility. Commoners also had improved access to an array of imported prestige goods, indicating that they had greater involvement in long-distance trade.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Classic period collapse in Mesoamerica has been identified as an important research problem for over fifty years. For many years, views of Classic period political history and the collapse, particularly in the Mexican Highlands, were dominated

by long-term research on the largest and most powerful political centers, such as Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, which continued as regional powers for hundreds of years, often from as early as the Formative period. Although the fortunes of many Classic period polities waxed and waned, the collapse is usually viewed as the end of a long period of structural stability in ruling institutions and ideologies, despite considerable debate concerning the degree of political centralization, especially in the Maya Lowlands (Fox et al. 1996). Research on the complex polities of Classic period Mesoamerica is increasingly recognizing that in many regions centralized political authority was, in fact, not characterized by long-term stability (Marcus 1998; Sharer 1994). For example, as discussed in this chapter, the Oaxaca coastal polity of Río Viejo went through two periods of centralization and collapse before the Late Postclassic. In highland Oaxaca political centers such as Yucuita, Monte Negro, and Huamelulpan emerge by ca. 300 BCE only to collapse a few hundred years later and many Late Classic Maya polities were relatively short-lived.

The relative instability of political authority has most often been attributed to the unsuccessful outcome of conflict and competition among ruling dynasties. This position reflects the dominant perspective in Mesoamerican archaeology that Classic period political history resulted from the actions of powerful nobles operating within the structural constraints of prehispanic political systems, with little input from commoners and lesser nobles (Joyce et al. 2001; Robin 1999). Fortunately, recent research on Maya polities, particularly models of decentralized states, are beginning to consider structural contradictions and social tensions along with the actions of lesser nobles as important factors in political history (e.g., Fash et al. 2004; Iannone 2002; McAnany 1995). For example, the decentralized models focus attention on conflict between lineage heads and the rulers who periodically attempted to consolidate tenuous affiliations of multiple lineages into states. These models, however, are still focused on structural properties with polities cycling historically between their more centralized and decentralized iterations (e.g., Marcus 1993, 1998). The success or failure of nobles in warfare, trade, the production of wealth items, and the exploitation of commoners moves the polity back and forth along this continuum of relative centralization. Political organization, "dynamism," and the activities of nobles are therefore tightly constrained within the centralized-decentralized continuum. There is relatively little consideration, however, of historical contingency and the ways in which political formations are continuously produced and transformed by ongoing social relations and negotiations.

Another tendency of current models of Mesoamerican political history is to view common people as passive participants in systems of political relations rather than as people who contribute to ongoing social processes and transformations. An impressive body of research has investigated the participation of commoners in domestic and political economies (e.g., Blanton et al. 1996; Fedick 1996; Masson

and Freidel 2002), yet, as argued by several researchers, nobles are still seen as having overwhelmingly controlled political economies as well as ruling ideas and institutions (Joyce et al. 2001; Sheets 2000). For example, Graham (2002:413–415) observes that views of elite control of political economy that have dominated archaeological research are problematic:

I do not believe that the bulk of Maya society passively allowed power to accumulate in the hands of particular elites. I take the view that all of the Maya at all levels—other elites, craftsmen, farmers, traders, fisherfolk—made decisions that bore on economic development. Some of these decisions fostered compliance with elite consolidation of power; others forced it into particular molds; still others consistently and pervasively weakened elite power. (Graham 2002:413)

Although many researchers have considered the ways in which commoners participated in political economy as well as public ceremonies and labor projects, there has been little consideration of the ways in which the actions, interests, dispositions, and traditions of common people affected and altered elite decision making, ruling ideas and institutions, and systems of political economy (for exceptions, see Ashmore et al. 2004; Clark 2004; Joyce et al. 2001; Pyburn 1998; Sheets 2000).

Recent theoretical considerations of complex societies in Mesoamerica and beyond, however, have recognized that systems of domination are always negotiated and that we must consider commoners and non-ruling elites in our models of ancient and modern political systems (Barber 2005; Comaroff 1985; Joyce et al. 2001; Miller et al. 1989; Patterson and Gailey 1987; Scott 1990). Indeed, since the late 1960s research in social history and historical anthropology has emphasized the role of commoners in social transformation and has highlighted the importance of commoner historical consciousness in acts of resistance (Blickle 1981; Guha 1983; Sahlins 1985; Thompson 1963; Wolf 1969). More generally, Giddens (1979:88–94) has argued that all power relations are relations of autonomy and dependence where even the least powerful agents have some ability to act. Ideology, power, and systems of domination need to be problematized not just for times of fragmentation and collapse but for periods marked by long-term continuity in ruling ideologies and institutions. Social and political life is always the outcome of the embodied practices of all members of society, even during periods of apparent stability in social institutions (Giddens 1979; Paukert 2001; Scott 1990). In ancient Mesoamerica as in all societies, structures of domination were continuously produced in practice and there was always the possibility of negotiating or contesting political relations. Commoners and lesser nobles could contest domination, for example, by claiming that rulers were not meeting their moral responsibilities as politico-religious leaders, by withdrawing support from rulers, by choosing which

elite commodities they would acquire from nobles, by voting with their feet and leaving political centers, and by forming competing factions (Ashmore et al. 2004; Joyce 2004; Joyce et al. 2001; Sheets 2000). Political domination was not a given but was part of a dynamic, negotiated history. Of course, a consideration of social negotiation does not negate the potential importance of interelite relations. For example, competition and conflict among nobles of different polities have implications for the negotiation of power among people within polities that should be considered in models of political change.

The research in the lower Río Verde Valley has begun to consider the social negotiation of power and how various forms of domination produced different constraints and opportunities for people differentially situated within these polities. The data from the lower Río Verde Valley show that the Classic period collapse was not the termination of a long and stable tradition of centralized authority. Prior to the Classic period collapse, the region went through an earlier cycle of political centralization and fragmentation. The Formative period in the lower Verde saw a steady increase in population and political centralization, culminating in the development of a complex polity with its capital at the urban center of Río Viejo. Ruling institutions and ideologies were relatively inclusive and corporate with evidence for unifying social practices, such as ritual feasting and the communal construction of monumental buildings. Río Viejo continued as a regional political center through the Terminal Formative, a duration of less than 400 years. At 250 CE, the Terminal Formative Río Viejo polity collapsed, perhaps violently, with the destruction of the site's acropolis. Following a period of political fragmentation during the Early Classic, a centralized polity reemerged at Río Viejo, but it was based on a more exclusionary form of political power legitimated through the aggrandizement of rulers. The Late Classic Río Viejo polity continued for roughly 300 years until its collapse at ca. 800 CE.

The prehispanic history of the lower Río Verde Valley can be described in general terms as a series of cycles of centralization and fragmentation. Unlike Marcus's (1993, 1998) dynamic model, however, I argue that rather than simply cycling between centralized and decentralized "stages" of an overarching political structure, the periods of centralization and fragmentation in the lower Verde were historically contingent and highly variable. In the lower Verde, the periods of centralization during the Terminal Formative and Late Classic, like the periods of fragmentation in the Early Classic and Early Postclassic, differed greatly from one another in terms of political organization, social relations, and ideology.

Although the nature of rulership during the two periods of political centralization appears to have been quite different, the political history of the region suggests that centralization was relatively tenuous and contested (Barber 2005; Barber and Joyce 2007; Joyce 2003; Joyce et al. 2001). Centralized political authority during

the Terminal Formative seems to have been built by mobilizing support through the sponsoring of communal rituals and works projects. Ruling institutions did not emphasize the personal or familial power of rulers but rather focused on nobles as part of a larger corporate body. Yet the evidence suggests a contradiction and tension between earlier less hierarchical forms of social organization and the increasing power of Terminal Formative rulers. Rulers seem to have been struggling to negotiate and legitimate rising inequality and political centralization within the context of traditional ideological principles that were more communal, egalitarian, and politically localized. That the acropolis was burned and abandoned shortly after its completion and then left unoccupied for 250 years is intriguing evidence suggesting that the rulers of Río Viejo may have been ultimately unsuccessful in institutionalizing their authority in the long-term and gaining the widespread consent of commoners and local nobles. By the Early Classic, the lower Verde region had fragmented into numerous, probably competing, polities.

Despite the return of centralized political authority and the emergence of a regional polity during the Late Classic, evidence from the Early Postclassic suggests that power continued to be contested. In contrast to political authority in the Terminal Formative, Late Classic rulers set themselves apart from their subjects in monumental art and mortuary practices. The Late Classic acropolis with its plaza, public buildings, and carved monuments of rulers was a sacred space where dominant ideologies were reinforced through symbolism and ritual performance. Relative to the Terminal Formative, however, commoners were less actively engaged in public projects like the construction of monumental buildings. References to sacrifice on carved stone monuments raise the possibility that coercion may have been an important component of Late Classic political authority. Elsewhere in Mesoamerica, a similar trend toward self-aggrandizement of rulers and the exclusion of commoners from state ceremonies and sacred spaces is evident at Monte Albán in the Oaxaca Valley and at several lowland Maya centers (Joyce 2004; Joyce and Weller 2007).

Archaeological research has so far yielded little evidence for the contestation of Late Classic political authority in the lower Río Verde Valley and elsewhere (Joyce et al. 2001; Joyce and Weller 2007), although this may be due to commoners having resisted in subtle ways that did not directly confront authority (see Giddens 1979:145–150; Scott 1990). By the Early Postclassic, however, commoners at Río Viejo were occupying the acropolis, dismantling public buildings, and reusing carved stone monuments for utilitarian purposes, suggesting the active denigration of earlier spaces, objects, and buildings that housed and symbolized rulers and ruling institutions (Joyce et al. 2001). I argue that the destruction, denigration, and reuse of these material symbols of the Late Classic centralized polity were based on social memories of the experiences of subjugation among commoners. By disman-

ting the public buildings of the Late Classic polity to build their houses, commoners were re-inscribing the acropolis with markers of their identities as freed from the subjugation of the rulers and ruling institutions that were once housed in those buildings. Perhaps the most evocative symbol of this re-inscription was the symbolic act of grinding maize on the head of a Late Classic ruler.

Seen from this perspective, the Classic period collapse appears less like a catastrophic end to stable and deeply embedded institutions of rulership and more like the outcome, at least in part, of social contradictions and tensions that were inherent in the reproduction of more complex regional and centralized political systems. The Classic period collapse in the lower Verde, however, was not an isolated historical transformation but instead was undoubtedly linked to the collapse of political institutions throughout much of Mesoamerica. The fact that numerous polities collapsed from 600 to 900 CE draws us back out to the macroscale and factors that might have affected polities throughout Mesoamerica, such as climate change, widespread warfare, and landscape degradation. In the lower Verde, population decline resulting from environmental factors like landscape degradation or drought are not indicated, although ongoing geomorphological and palynological studies are investigating the possibility of ecological factors in the collapse. The movement of people into defensible piedmont locations and the unusually high frequency of projectile points recovered from Early Postclassic sites suggests the possibility that conflict was a factor in the collapse (Joyce et al. 2001:371–372). It is unclear whether conflict was intraregional, involving members of the fragmented Río Viejo polity, or if it involved incursions by people from outside the region. Another factor was the importance of networks of interregional relations to the negotiation and legitimization of Late Classic political authority (Demarest et al. 2004; Sabloff and Andrews 1986). As polities like Teotihuacan and Monte Albán began to collapse between 600 and 800 CE, networks of trade, alliance, and intermarriage were increasingly disrupted and reoriented (Ringle et al. 1998), which may have begun to undermine Río Viejo's rulers. A similar process may have contributed to the collapse of the Monte Albán polity in the Valley of Oaxaca (Joyce 2004:211–212).

Regardless of the specific set of factors, by ca. 800 CE, Río Viejo's rulers were no longer able to mobilize the support of their followers as people left the political center and ceased participating in political ceremonies at the capital (also see Ashmore et al. 2004). Although the collapse in the lower Verde probably did not involve a commoner rebellion, allegiance to the nobility may have been weak given the exclusive and perhaps coercive character of Late Classic political authority. Commoners may not have supported regional elites in the face of external military incursions, internal factional competition, or economic hardship due to environmental change. The way in which symbols of rulership were treated in the Early Postclassic suggests that commoners increasingly penetrated and perhaps actively resisted the dominant



ideology in the years prior to the political collapse. By the Early Postclassic, people were free of the coercive power of Late Classic nobles and were able to publicly oppose and subvert the meanings of traditional symbols of political power.

Although many questions remain concerning the Classic period collapse on the Oaxaca Coast, I have tried in this chapter to draw attention to the importance of considering political relations in a more dynamic fashion. As in all political systems, the power of Late Classic rulers and ruling institutions was not a given; it was produced and reproduced in practice, negotiated to varying degrees, and sometimes contested or actively resisted. To understand the collapse and prehisppanic Mesoamerican political history more generally, archaeologists must adopt a more dynamic view of systems of political domination that recognizes the ways in which all people, commoners as well as nobles, participated in social reproduction and transformation.

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#### NOTES

1. For comparative purposes, researchers in the lower Río Verde Valley (Joyce 1991a, 1991b; Joyce et al. 2001; Levine 2002; Workinger 2002) have followed the convention of archaeologists throughout Oaxaca (see Drennan 1983; Lind 1991–1992; Martínez López

et al. 2000) of basing their ceramic chronologies on uncorrected radiocarbon dates. The Late Classic in the lower Río Verde Valley is dated to 500–800 CE based on ceramic cross-ties, stratigraphic evidence, and two uncorrected radiocarbon dates from excavated charcoal deposits at Río Viejo: 1410 ± 180 bp, or 540 CE (Beta-85358), and 1230 ± 70 bp, or 729 CE (Beta-62906). The dating of the Early Postclassic is based on ceramic cross-ties, stratigraphy, and two uncorrected radiocarbon dates from excavated charcoal deposits at Río Viejo (Joyce et al. 2001): 997 ± 47 bp, or 953 CE (AA37669), and 899 ± 44 bp, or 1051 CE (AA40034). King (Chapter 8) reports an uncorrected date of 1035 CE from her excavations in Early Postclassic contexts at Río Viejo. Of course, the chronology will be modified as additional radiocarbon determinations are acquired.

2. Early Postclassic Río Viejo includes two components, the main settlement, which covers 140 hectares, and a 20-hectare component along the western end of the site.
3. The San Marquitos site as a whole includes multiple components during both the Late Classic and Early Postclassic. The settlement figures cited here are only for the major Early Postclassic component and its Late Classic precursor.
4. One of these sculptures, Jamiltepec Monument 1, was moved from Río Viejo to Jamiltepec in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Urcid and Joyce 2001).

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Stacie M. King

## Interregional Networks of the Oaxacan Early Postclassic

### CONNECTING THE COAST AND THE HIGHLANDS

#### INTRODUCTION

Rulers of successful highland Mesoamerican cities, such as Teotihuacan and Monte Albán, had good reason for establishing and maintaining ties with coastal Oaxacan communities during the prehispanic era. The climatological and ecological regime of coastal Oaxaca made it a highly valuable and politically important region throughout prehispanic and early Colonial Mesoamerica. The raw material for many desirable Mesoamerican luxury goods, such as feathers, marine shell, *papyrus* dye, cacao, and cotton were abundantly available in coastal Oaxaca, as were salt and palm products (e.g., oils and fibers) (Byland and Pohl 1994; Feinman and Nicholas 1992; Monaghan 1994; Spores 1993). The lower Río Verde Valley, in particular, has extremely fertile agricultural land owing in part to the alluvial deposition of eroded topsoil from the highlands along the coastal plain (Figure 8.1) (Joyce and Mueller 1992, 1997). The lower Verde site of Río Viejo grew to its largest size and maintained control over a vast coastal area during most of the Classic period (250–800 CE) (Joyce and King 2001; Joyce and Workinger 1996) in part because of the wealth and power generated from managing the export of coastal resources to the highlands.

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## After Monte Albán

Transformation and Negotiation  
in Oaxaca, Mexico



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