

Where East Meets West: The Formative in Mexico's Central Highlands

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Abstract Mexico's Central Highlands form one of Mesoamerica's fundamental cultural seams, a point of overlap between two traditions, one to the east and the other to the west. Although this area is usually included in the west, it can be more productively viewed as an interface, the physical space where people, goods, and ideas passed from one side to the other, and thus it holds many keys for our understanding of emerging social complexity in Mesoamerica. In reviewing the last two decades of Formative period (1500 BC–AD 100) research in this crucial territory, we focus on themes that reveal the variation and dynamism of interregional interaction, including the formation of regional traditions, exchange systems, and foreign “influence,” and others that help contextualize the events and processes of that time, like household studies and environmental degradation. We stress that this part of Mexico is undergoing relentless development so time is of the essence if we are to broaden our perspectives on social evolution in the Central Highlands. This issue cannot be resolved by rescue and salvage work because it requires long-term, interdisciplinary projects to unravel multifaceted problems.

Keywords Mesoamerica · Formative period · Social complexity · Interregional interaction

Introduction

The Central Highlands of Mexico cover some 50,000 km² on either side of the Transverse Neovolcanic Axis that runs along the 19th parallel; it includes the modern states of Mexico, Tlaxcala, and Morelos, in addition to southern Hidalgo, central Puebla, and the Federal District (Fig. 1) (Cowgill 2000, p. 250;

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