Networks of Power

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Networks of Power: Political Relations in the Late Postclassic Naco Valley.
Ever since 1943, when Paul Kirchhoff gave us the first general description of Mesoamerica as a culturally integrated region, archaeologists and scholars have been excavating the territory and filling in the map using new combinations of methods and theories. This work of expanding and deepening our knowledge of Mesoamerican peoples has been carried out by, among other publications, the expansive *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, numerous journals, articles, and scores of monographs revealing the history and structure of city-states, cultural regions, and regional interactions while also exploring ways to construct more useful chronologies and find effective methods of reading and interpreting the ever-growing evidence of social integration.

This new volume, *Networks of Power: Political Relations in the Late Postclassic Naco Valley*, meticulously researched and well written by Edward Schortman and Patricia Urban, takes us into a long-neglected part of Mesoamerican space and time and offers a fresh model of how to understand processes of social interaction within Southeast Mesoamerica and beyond. Arguing that the Naco valley has “suffered from benign neglect by archaeologists, especially when compared with the much better studied Maya lowlands immediately to
the west,” the authors explore archaeological and written evidence suggesting that Naco was “both a major population center and an entrepôt within exchange networks linking lower Central America with central Mexico” and was therefore important in understanding wider trading practices and social history. Instead of a more traditional archaeological approach of focusing on the single supreme ruler, structure, or city-state or emphasizing the category of the agency of individuals, the authors carry out “an experiment in using a ‘network perspective’ on interpersonal relations to describe political structures . . . concentrating on the ways people actually wage political contests close to the ground.” Schortman and Urban's model seeks to give a new interpretive space to “local processes as products of human actions taken within distinctive historical streams that were affected, but not determined, by long-distance interactions, such as trade and inter-elite alliances” (italics added). This means a new light is thrown on power relations constructed by the people of Naco, who appear as “participants with diverse viewpoints who actively construed their relations with other peoples, including the Maya, in ways that made sense to them.”

As the authors show, Naco’s cosmopolitan nature is evident in numerous kinds of data, including archaeological patterns and early colonial ethnohistories, that show linguistic and economic diversity beyond what was previously understood. Readers of this book will learn how different towns and wider communities were integrated into dynamic social configurations in which non-elites played very effective roles in contesting the dominant structures and classes for material and symbolic assets—through effective networking. The result of these networking alliances was that centralized political structures were constantly responding to localized pressures that made them vulnerable to change and variation.

If the authors are correct in their interpretations, then Mesoamerican worlds were more fluid, “perpetually unresolved,” unstable, and inwardly dynamic than previously thought. At the least, we learn to focus on and appreciate more than before how non-elites organized themselves in effective arrangements that enabled them to participate in and influence the power competitions that permeated their lives. The peoples of Naco struggled productively to ensure wider access to the gods and the goods by using social systems of cooperation and competition. We learn that even within a world topped by royal families, subordinates continued to hold important degrees of power to “articulate, accomplish, and legitimize goals.” These subordinates manipulated subsets of resources, enabling them to play effective roles in the power contests that determined, to varying degrees, their quality of life.

One of this book’s real values will depend on how its readers test against and apply this networking model and the new picture of Naco and its neighbors to
other regions of Mesoamerica. At the least, we feel certain that Paul Kirchhoff
would appreciate the way his original vision of Mesoamerica has been filled in
over the years and how this book in particular makes that vision more dynamic
and enigmatic at the same time.

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