Networks of Power

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A society, as defined here (see chapter 2), is a territorially bounded network of networks. Members of a society together, if variably, participate in a common web that has distinguishable, if ever mutable and porous, physical limits (Wolf 1982: 18, 2001). A society incorporates and subsumes localized nets, such as house groups and households. Its borders are also transcended by networks that link some of its members with compatriots living in other societies. The important point is that residents of a specific area participate in a web that subsumes smaller domestic nets and define themselves in part through participation in this overarching network. Societies, like all nets, are products of purposeful human choices to associate with some and not with others. One of the primary projects around which a society crystallizes is the exercise of power. Societies are in part outcomes of efforts by elites to distinguish their clients from those beholden to other magnates, thus staking claims to the goods and services of a specific population (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). The drawing of borders is a step toward establishing privileged demands on the labor and loyalty of a certain population.

We have argued at several points that small-scale domestic networks within the late prehistoric Naco valley were arranged within distinct webs focused on
elite households at Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco. This position is based on the proposition that members of these households exercised some power over their compatriots who lived in smaller, more isolated houses. Each such household, therefore, comprised a central node within hierarchically structured networks that encompassed varying numbers of adherents. The comparable sizes and decorative elaboration seen in the constructions surrounding Naco’s northeast principal plaza and Site PVN 306’s eastern principal plaza (EPP) imply that the residents of these architectural groups enjoyed roughly equivalent prominence within the valley. Site PVN 144’s household was able to command smaller labor forces in erecting its domiciles and so was probably ranked lower in the valley-wide political hierarchy. Nevertheless, that site’s unique configuration and combination of functions suggest that it played a central role in muting inter-household competition and encouraging feelings of solidarity throughout the Naco valley settlement cluster.

Neither of the Naco valley’s paramount households was able to claim absolute dominion over the basin’s population. Rather, elites who lived at Naco seem to have reached an impasse with those who resided at Site PVN 306. As discussed in chapter 6, these notables may have anchored two ends of a single, extensive settlement that stretched an estimated 5 km southwest-northeast. It is this population cluster that the Spanish likely glossed as “Naco.”

In many ways, the settlement aggregate made up of Sites PVN 306, PVN 144, and Naco qualifies as a society. Close and regular interactions among its participants are signaled by the precise and numerous material and behavioral similarities found throughout its extent. These commonalities reach down to the level of individual houses, where nearly identical paraphernalia was used in such essential tasks as food preparation and serving as well as in religious devotions. Public gatherings were also apparently organized in similar ways, combining feasting with religious observances conducted around comparable ritual foci established with the same concern for directionality. As noted repeatedly throughout this volume, populations in the late prehistoric Naco valley were not homogeneous with respect to practice or belief. There were differences in the scales and intensities at which ubiquitous activities were pursued at different locales within and between sites. Similarly, some behaviors, such as those associated with the ball game, were restricted to unique locales within the valley. Nonetheless, as important as it is to bear these differences in mind, they appear as variations on cultural themes that were widespread across known portions of the basin.

Too little is known about behavior and material patterns in neighboring areas to delimit the borders of this society with any certainty. Anthony Wonderley’s work in the Sula Plain hints at the existence of other networks in this nearby basin, related to, but possibly distinguishable from, those defined.
for the Naco valley (1985). As noted in chapter 1, materials from the contemporary middle Ulua drainage 40 km to the south do not closely resemble those discussed here. Such distinctions do not preclude the existence of webs that connected residents of these zones. They do, however, suggest that such connections were neither intense nor regular enough to define a distinct society. More work is required to limn the outlines of webs that might have tied residents of the Naco settlement cluster to those who lived in nearby areas and to assess the intensity and nature of these linkages. Whatever its boundaries may have been, the Naco settlement cluster likely served as the core of a society that flourished during the fourteenth through early sixteenth centuries. Rather than comprising a network of networks orchestrated from above, this particular configuration took shape in a context of unresolved competitions for preeminence among its most powerful members. How this society operated in such an unstable political environment will be considered in the next section.

**SUMMARY OF POWER AND NETWORKS IN THE ROBLE PHASE NACO VALLEY**

Our investigations of Roble phase Naco valley material and social forms yield a very basic outline of the networks within which the basin’s population was organized. They also provide suggestions as to how these webs were implicated in power contests and in the creation of the society outlined earlier in this chapter. As incomplete as this overview is, it highlights the complexity of late prehistoric political structures in the Naco valley and the manifold ways these fragile and volatile arrangements were implicated within far-reaching processes through the actions of network members.

**Houses and Households**

The most basic social web identified at all three investigated sites consists of those individuals of different genders and varying ages who resided in a single house. Here, web membership was enacted by daily participation in common projects of production, reproduction, and devotion. These tasks included producing, preparing, and sharing food, as well as engaging in religious rites that employed ceramic ladle incense burners and, in some cases, pottery figurines. House nets were therefore constantly being defined in the processes of daily interactions that gave rise to a common sense of self and shared purpose. Although not defined primarily by their roles in political struggles, house groups posed essential problems to those seeking power. These challenges included (1) redirecting their members’ productive efforts into projects that
advanced elite goals, (2) supplementing loyalties to houses with affiliations that transcended those narrow boundaries, and (3) focusing allegiances on a small body of leaders acknowledged as having legitimate claims to the support of the majority. Building hierarchies and centralizing power required that house groups be subsumed within larger nets, their members’ sense of themselves contextualized within frameworks of production and meaning that privileged would-be rulers.

These goals were partially achieved through several related steps. The first involved the formation of a network within Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco through which elites could coordinate their efforts to achieve domination. The mechanism employed in each case was the creation of a single household whose members resided in relatively substantial constructions surrounding a sizable plaza. Solidarity within this net was enacted by common participation in a range of economic, social, and ideological tasks that replicated those attested to in individual houses. In one sense, therefore, the household was a house writ large.

Households were not, however, simply amplified versions of smaller domestic units. The fact that they were organized according to somewhat different principles is suggested by the presence of special-purpose constructions, such as Strs. 306-124, 306-125, and 306-22 in the EPP. As we argued in chapter 3, these buildings likely played key roles in integrating household members within a single, relatively unified web. It was probably through activities conducted within these venues that any pressures that encouraged the fissioning of domestic nets into individual houses were addressed and overcome.

Difficulties in identifying individual residences, especially those not built atop surface-visible platforms, mean we cannot preclude the possibility that households were more widespread in the Roble phase Naco valley than it now appears. What is clear, however, is that webs incorporating several house groups within one residential net were only prominently expressed in a few cases, one each of which is found at Naco and Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144. If other households existed, they were not as forcefully materialized on the landscape.

The formation of a household, therefore, apparently required overcoming strong tendencies that favored the autonomy of individual houses. The significant effort invested in creating the domiciles that comprise plaza groups implies that one reward for frustrating domestic divisions was privileged control over relatively sizable amounts of labor. Households, in sum, appear as the self-conscious creations of people who ostentatiously joined together in the pursuit of common domestic, ritual, and political projects. Their regular and sustained cooperation would certainly have given them an advantage in dealing with the smaller, scattered domestic groups in which their subordinates were organized.
CONCLUSIONS

It would probably be a mistake to attribute too much unity to these paramount households. Variations in the sizes and degrees of decorative elaboration among their component residences, especially evident at Site PVN 306, imply that different people within one household enjoyed variable success in their efforts to control labor. What the bases for such intra-household political discrepancies might have been is unknown. Still, the fact that they existed tentatively points to some tension born of competitions over power within elite residential webs.

However successful households were in coordinating the actions of their members in pursuit of shared objectives, they apparently had not divined a means of forging inter-household cooperation for political projects conducted on a grander scale. The location of the two largest known plaza groups at opposite ends of the Naco settlement cluster, in fact, implies the operation of centripetal forces driving them apart. Most likely their participants were competing for control over networks of supporters. The comparable sizes and decorative embellishments evidenced in each household plaza indicate that neither set of contestants had achieved a lasting advantage in this struggle by the early sixteenth century. Rather, members of each household were using much the same sets of tangible and conceptual assets to seize leadership of webs of comparable extent and size. The failure of one network to gain exclusive control over the distribution of these resources resulted in the inferred stalemate.

Power and the Manipulation of Tangible Resources

The clearest example of the way relations of inequality were tangibly enacted in the late prehistoric basin involves the fashioning and exchange of obsidian blades. These distinctive implements were fabricated by a few part-time specialists who lived in modest accommodations at Naco and Site PVN 306, well outside elite households. The widespread distribution of blades across both settlements and Site PVN 144, where there is no good evidence for their production, indicates that this commodity passed freely and in considerable volumes among all known valley residents. The mechanisms by which such transfers were effected remain unknown. However the transactions were arranged, the movement of obsidian blades linked consumers and producers of equivalent rank in relatively stable social and economic relations. Operating largely outside direct elite supervision, these nets were shaped primarily by choices artisans and consumers made concerning those with whom they wished to affiliate within and across site boundaries. Exchanges involving obsidian blades were thus one way among presumably many by which the denizens of Sites PVN 306, PVN 144, and Naco palpably established, expressed, and extended connections among members of different houses. These sorts of heterarchically
structured ties, cross-cutting localized domestic webs, promoted the regular, close, and stable interactions materialized in the archaeological record.

The challenge for would-be leaders was to turn these interactions among equals into a hierarchically structured web focused explicitly on elites. This, we argue, was attempted through centralized monopolies over the local distribution of polyhedral obsidian cores essential to blade knapping. Converting this crucial raw material into political capital required that elites alone negotiate relations between two networks, one extending beyond the valley to the distant sources from which the cores were derived and the other providing artisans within the basin with this indispensable component of their trade.

The former web depended on cooperation among rulers of different domains and traders who enacted their ties through the exchange of what were likely many tangible and intangible prestations, including polyhedral obsidian cores. There is little to suggest that such links were hierarchically structured. Instead, it is more likely that this territorially extensive web united merchants and political elites who interacted as equals and were mutually dependent on each other for the support and goods needed to sustain their preeminence at home. The crucial point is that these magnates policed participation in the web, ensuring that only the high-born had access to the symbols that defined net membership. We will return to the issue of how such boundaries were drawn later in this chapter.

Once obsidian nuclei entered the Naco valley, we hypothesize that they were used to forge bonds of inequality between giver and receiver. Elites, as the sole sources of cores, monopolized their intra-basin distribution and were thus in an excellent position to dictate the terms of their exchange. Unable to circumvent these noble entrepreneurs, blade knappers would have surrendered labor and loyalty in return for the basic materials from which they fashioned their own economic and social networks.

Such control over a handful of artisans would not, by itself, yield political preeminence. The key to transforming the indebtedness of a few into dominion over many, we believe, lies in the elites’ ability to enhance and exploit the centrality of blade knappers within larger social and economic nets. By favoring select house groups with the knowledge and raw materials needed to fabricate blades, magnates gave these artisans decided advantages in the creation of social networks vis-à-vis other house groups. They alone could have fabricated the much-desired tools whose exchange helped define these webs. The alliances forged through the exchange of blades and the goods and services received in return for these tools would have flowed toward, and centered on, knappers. Artisans were indebted to elites for the cores that made their centrality in socio-economic nets possible, and at least some of those obligations and items would have flowed up the hierarchy from artisans to their high-born patrons. In this
way elites ultimately, if indirectly, controlled a wide array of networks that cross-cut individual houses, entrapping entire populations in webs of obligation and debt.

Engagement by these nodal house groups in other crafts, including pottery making, fashioning flake tools from perlite and chert, and spinning/weaving, would only have enhanced their importance in Roble phase socioeconomic webs. Whether the latter occupations were encouraged by local rulers or resulted from the initiatives of specific house groups is unknown. Whatever their inspiration, the proliferation of specialized manufacturing within certain houses redounded to the benefit of elites.

A monopoly over the parochial distribution of obsidian cores is a slender thread with which to weave a unified realm. Elite prominence depended on maintaining good relations with foreign suppliers of this commodity and frustrating efforts by others to circumvent their exclusive control over the dissemination of blade cores within the valley (Kipp and Schortman 1989). Further, insofar as craft workers were free to build their own networks, they could establish strong foundations from which to challenge the pretensions of their social betters. At the very least, artisans and their house groups were in a position to negotiate for concessions from the elites they served, thus yielding a fragile political structure. Such potential threats to elite dominance may have encouraged the distribution of cores to several house groups. In this way, no one set of artisans could use a monopoly over blade fabrication to establish its preeminence in multiple webs.

The strategy was successful up to a point. The distribution of blade cores suggests that the residents of prominent households who lived at Naco and Site PVN 306 moved effectively to control exclusively the distribution of these nuclei to their immediate supporters. In fact, “gifts” of cores were probably one way of attracting and tying clients to these elite-led webs. The prospect of securing blades from knappers may, in turn, have lured additional supporters to these nets, resulting in the concentration of people observed around Naco’s northeast principal plaza and Site PVN 306’s EPP. Such triumphs were tempered by the failure of either household to exclude the other from the networks through which polyhedral cores were obtained. Consequently, no one set of contestants could use the local distribution of this essential resource to gain lasting political advantages over the other.

Reordering the Conceptual Realm

Bolstering support for paramount households required the creation of other networks that were more firmly and directly under centralized control. Leaders of prominent households at Naco and Site PVN 306 in particular
pursued this strategy through the promotion of ideologies that simultaneously stressed intra-web solidarity and inequality. The former was encouraged by the promotion of novel symbols that adorned food-serving bowls used by all segments of the valley’s population. These motifs synthesized local elements with long histories in Naco valley design traditions with exotic features emblematic of the Quetzalcoatl cult then widespread throughout southern Mesoamerica. In this way, new network-wide affiliations were simultaneously linked to parochial beliefs deeply rooted in the basin’s past and to conceptual structures untethered to particular places and times. Valley residents were thus encouraged to contextualize their historical connections to antecedent local populations within broader identities that encompassed the entire Naco valley and ultimately may have extended beyond its borders.

The emotional attraction of these new networks was enhanced by linking them closely to food sharing within the house group. Commensality embodied essential projects of food production, distribution, and consumption that together defined the house as an enduring social entity. By emblazoning symbols of a network-encompassing affiliation on ceramic bowls used to serve food within these domestic webs, the novel linkages were infused with the deeply felt positive emotions engendered in ceremonies of house group solidarity. The enactment of large-scale feasts using the same sorts of containers, possibly including all members of the webs centered on elite households, would have reinforced the ties between house and network in ways that were hard to ignore (Chase and Chase 1988). Such appeals to unity would have countered tendencies toward fissioning based on loyalties to specific houses.

The engendering of feelings of network unity facilitated centralized control but did not by itself ensure who would exercise that power. To turn supra-house affiliations to their own purposes, would-be leaders had to place themselves at the center of these extensive networks. They did so in this case by monopolizing the performance of certain rites that were integral to the functioning of the new webs. The observances in question were centered on circular structures erected within the open western plazas of Naco (Str. 4F-1) and Site PVN 306 (Strs. 306-17, 306-19, and 306-174). These buildings are virtually unprecedented in the Naco valley architectural corpus and were clearly inspired by foreign models, once again closely linked to the Quetzalcoatl cult.

The relatively large amounts of skilled and unskilled labor invested in three of these four constructions suggest that they were commissioned by local notables who lived in the households adjoining Strs. 4F-1, 306-17, 306-19, and 306-174. The juxtaposition of elite households and ritual foci also points to control of the latter by members of the former. The conduct of rites involving round structures was thus emphatically not open to all but only to those with the means to erect these essential ritual foci. Further, use of the platforms
required knowledge of the conceptual structures embodied in the form and organization of these buildings. Insofar as such knowledge was derived from foreign sources, it could be monopolized by those who participated in the extra-valley webs through which the relevant information flowed (Boone and Smith 2003; Masson 2003b; Smith 2003b). The most likely occupants of the basin to have been familiar with this information were the elites who lived in the paramount households of Naco and Site PVN 306.

The relationship between elite ritual and broad network affiliations is suggested by the events that occurred within the open western plazas that contained Strs. 4F-1, 306-17, 306-19, and 306-174. In both Naco and Site PVN 306, these extensive spaces were venues for rituals and feasts that involved large segments, perhaps all, of the entire populations of both settlements. These celebrations employed many of the same serving and storage vessels, as well as ladle incense burners, used in similar events conducted within house groups. Hence, public activities in the western plazas were analogs, on a much larger scale, of the ritual and food-sharing projects that defined membership in house groups throughout the late prehistoric Naco valley. One major difference is that at the centers of these general gatherings were dramatically distinctive architectural forms with no known counterparts outside the western plazas. The conjunction of foreign-inspired building forms with food sharing and rites tied to local domestic webs strongly suggests that elements of an alien faith were incorporated with local practices and beliefs. Insofar as elites alone performed rituals linked to the exotic religion, they exercised exclusive control over aspects of the syncretized observances enacted in conjunction with large numbers of their followers. Members of the Naco and Site PVN 306 paramount households, in short, had developed a project through which their multiple webs were united and in which they occupied privileged positions.

We cannot know the precise manner by which foreign and local beliefs and actions were fused. Similarly, the extent to which different segments of ancient Naco valley populations believed in the elite-sponsored religion's precepts cannot be discerned. All we can say is that food was shared and religious observances were conducted within the Naco and Site PVN 306 western plazas. Whether all of the participants came with enthusiasm or not, large numbers of people did gather in these areas, and their views of themselves and those around them were likely shaped in the course of interactions conducted within these architecturally bounded spaces (Goffman 1974). The multiple resurfacings of Str. 306-19’s plaster surfaces, the several stages of construction seen on that building and on Str. 4F-1, and the renovations made to Str. 306-17 indicate that these symbols endured for a protracted span. Both lines of evidence imply that the effort to imbue local practice with alien conceptions was at least partially successful in attracting and holding the attention of the populations
that resided near each plaza group. By extension, we surmise that elites benefited from this success in that they were able to create a novel political order of which they were generally acknowledged as the legitimate leaders (Van Buren and Richards 2000).

As was the case with households, it would be a mistake to attribute too much homogeneity in belief and action to elite-sponsored rites. The ballcourt erected off the south edge of Naco’s southwest principal plaza has no known counterpart anywhere in the contemporary valley. Rites associated with the ball game, therefore, were probably limited to elites who lived at this center. These distinctive religious practices suggest that Naco’s magnates embraced elements of foreign religions that were not accepted elsewhere within the Roble phase valley. The stucco masks unearthed at Site PVN 144 also find no analogs in the basin. These locally unique architectural decorations are once again inspired by foreign concepts but are not clearly tied to faiths expressed through ballcourts or circular platforms. These varied symbols may have been tied in different ways to the interactions among elite factions within the Late Postclassic Naco valley. The replication of the distinctive architectural forms seen in Strs. 4F-1, 306-17, 306-19, and, to a more limited extent, 306-174 points to some overlap in these religious systems even as the erection of unique architectural forms speaks to distinctions within inter-elite webs.

Importantly, the emotional power of elite-sponsored religions and the affiliations they enacted originated in part in their association with practices that were ultimately derived from those conducted within small-scale domestic webs. The successful creation of hierarchically structured multi-house networks, therefore, did not require the obliteration of smaller-scale, presumably earlier, localized webs. In fact, promotion of the novel, extensive affiliation could not have succeeded without linking it clearly and explicitly to feelings engendered within house groups that continued to engage in common economic, social, and ritual projects.

The political strategies outlined here were only partially successful in that claims to power among leading factions were never prioritized. Members of the two prominent households participated in much the same extra-valley nets by which foreign religious symbols and practices were acquired. They deployed these exotic constructs in very similar manners, thus ensconcing themselves at the centers of two equivalent, hierarchically structured networks. As neither set of contestants could exclude the other from the knowledge needed to imagine, rationalize, and materialize these conceptual systems, they remained at an impasse. In the process of promoting very similar religious practices in search of adherents, the competing factions encouraged the widespread acceptance of a syncretized faith that combined local and foreign elements in nearly identical ways.
Histories of Power

Power in the Roble phase basin also depended on elite manipulation of networks that extended back in time. Those who seek to rule need to cast their claims to power not just in terms of present realities but also as natural outgrowths of processes that stretch into the past. In this way, a volatile field of negotiated political relations was transformed into an enduring structure, the inevitable outcome of events initiated by previous actors. Contests for pre-eminence, therefore, involved efforts to shape a consensus on social memory (Van Dyke and Alcock 2003: 2). As in all aspects of life, people rarely achieve their goals on their own. In this case, however, allies were sought from among historical personages whose significance was largely determined by the strategic calculations of later actors.

There is some evidence that Roble phase Naco valley elites were actively claiming ties to earlier political leaders. This effort is clearest at Site PVN 306, where the paramount household established its residences a scant 3 m west of the Terminal Classic center located on the settlement’s east margin. The latter was left largely intact, and its buildings were apparently used as sepulchers for at least some members of the Roble phase population. This close juxtaposition of monuments to past and present power, the preservation of those earlier expressions of preeminence, and their use as burial locations strongly imply that later rulers were explicitly linking themselves to some version of previous political actors and events.

Connections spanning different eras are less clearly expressed at Naco and Site PVN 144. The latter is 250 m southwest of Site PVN 128, one of the largest Terminal Classic political capitals in the valley, and Naco is bordered on the west by another focus of political power during this interval (Site PVN 99). In neither case, however, were Roble phase individuals interred on or around earlier edifices; nor is the connection between Terminal Classic monumental platforms and their Roble phase successors as clear as it is at Site PVN 306. The same basic political strategy may have been employed throughout the late prehistoric Naco valley, but with different degrees of emphasis. At Site PVN 306, ties to earlier leaders were unambiguously drawn, whereas at the other two settlements a greater physical and social distance was maintained between antecedents and successors. The reasons for such differences are unclear.

The memories promoted by Roble phase magnates were selective. Determining what was recalled and how it was remembered depended to a considerable extent on the exigencies of current political struggles (Alcock 2000; Van Dyke and Alcock, eds., 2003). Thus Terminal Classic monuments to power were preserved and, at Site PVN 306 at least, venerated, whereas ceramic designs associated with those earlier regimes were not replicated on Roble phase vessels. As argued in chapter 9, at least some of these earlier motifs probably
materialized membership in political networks dominated by elites who resided in such centers as Sites PVN 99, PVN 128, and the eastern cluster at Site PVN 306. Primary among these distinctive symbols were birds that, when they did appear in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, were radically transformed so as to bear only a slight resemblance to their earlier prototypes. Avians were sustained as a prominent theme in Naco valley symbol systems even as the birds themselves took different forms and were found on different parts of pottery containers.

Dramatic simplifications in the design repertoire of the basin’s potters, and changes in the nature of the symbols with which they adorned ceramic vessels, suggest that some aspects of past political forms were purged from memory even while those embodied in monumental platforms were highlighted. As in all cases of network building, some people, or features of their identities, are excluded while others are welcomed. This is apparently the case whether webs link living people at one moment in time or extend back to include progenitors who have little voice in the matter. The process of acceptance and rejection is always a creative one, limited in part by the claims others organized along similar lines in different webs make on the same resources, in this case the symbols by which memory is expressed.

Just as palpable and conceptual assets in the late prehistoric valley could not be monopolized by one set of elites, so, too, connections to the past were open to manipulation by multiple households. At least thirteen decaying monuments to Terminal Classic glory were dotted around the valley, each one of which could have been a touchstone for assertions of power. Given the apparent inability of one household to establish preeminent claims to whatever prestige was tied to these Terminal Classic capitals, the road was open for various contestants to stake their own connections to history.

**Limits on Power and Hierarchy**

Efforts to forge hierarchies and concentrate power enjoyed very limited success. Each of the paramount households commanded sufficient labor to erect locally impressive residences. They did, in this particular sense, prevail in capturing the labor of others and turning it to their own purposes. Even at Naco and Site PVN 306, however, the resulting monuments to elite power were modest in scale and adornment. The largest domiciles would have required only limited amounts of labor to erect and maintain. Further, materials recovered from paramount households do not indicate that their members successfully accumulated considerable quantities of valuables. Their roles as mediators within extensive trade networks may have precluded keeping much of what they exchanged (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Wonderley 1981). Nevertheless,
it is difficult to escape the notion that valuables used exclusively by notables to distinguish themselves from subordinates were conspicuous by their paucity at Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco.

The truncated hierarchy seen at the three studied settlements, and the relative poverty of the material assemblages associated with paramount households, may both arise from the strategies elites used to claim preeminence within their respective nets. Notables advanced their political agendas within a field of pre-existing social webs composed largely of individual house groups. Successful construction of a unified, hierarchically structured network required motivating members of these localized domestic units to acquiesce in giving up some of their autonomy in decision-making along with the fruits of their labor. All of the evidence in hand indicates that magnates were not in a position to impose a new political order on the valley’s majority. Instead, they had to create a consensus on what that new order would look like and who might legitimately lead it (Van Buren and Richards 2000). Reaching such an agreement required expending considerable political capital, including valuables such as obsidian and elaborately decorated pottery vessels.

The hoarding of blades might have made local notables “rich” but would not have bound supporters to them. Instead, elites entered into special relationships with artisans in several houses, providing them with cores in return for the ability to tap into the networks enacted through the exchange of the blades made from those nuclei. The more blades that were in circulation, the wider the spread of these webs and the more people who were enmeshed within nets of dependence that ultimately, if circuitously, tied them to elite entrepreneurs. That obliqueness was part of the problem from the rulers’ perspective. Unable to control the flow of blades directly, they had to rely on maintaining the goodwill and cooperation of knappers who employed considerable skill in transforming raw material into political capital. By spreading cores out among several houses, leaders at Naco and Site PVN 306 ensured that no one set of craft workers could turn a monopoly over blade production to its exclusive political advantage. This practice, however, also meant that members of the paramount household had to negotiate with, and coordinate the actions of, numerous blade producers. We can only imagine that this process introduced a significant element of contingency into power relations that would have been obviated by centralized control over obsidian working. For whatever reasons, such a solution was not pursued.

Similarly, concentration of the most complexly decorated ceramics within paramount households could have distinguished their members clearly from those they led. Such stockpiling, however, would have stymied elite efforts to incorporate members of distinct house groups within broader affiliations. It was through the widespread distribution of these vessels that symbols that
materialized inter-house affiliations penetrated each domestic web. Easing access to these containers was therefore essential to forge a unified affiliation and infuse that identity with the emotional power born of daily interactions among intimates. Once again, negotiating the terms of the new order required distributing wealth in the interest of sustaining power (Baines and Yoffee 2000).

We do not mean to imply that Roble phase elites lived an impoverished existence within their respective plaza groups. The few pieces of copper recovered in excavations within Site PV 306’s EPP, together with the more numerous whole artifacts of this material looted from Naco (Wonderley 1981), point to just some of the valuables local rulers could collect and over which they probably exercised exclusive control. The point is, however, that convincing the majority to enter into new hierarchical relations and surrender some power to leaders required achieving a consensus on the rightness of these new arrangements. Reaching that agreement meant expending considerable amounts of valuables as incentives to those who would be part of these new arrangements. While they did not strip social leaders of all their wealth, these processes still countered the large-scale accumulation of preciosities in relatively few hands.

The practices of negotiation and consensus building outlined here resulted in a fragile political structure. The assets controlled by Roble phase Naco valley paramount households were comparatively few, and their deployment in political projects required the cooperation of people from different ranks. Obsidian nuclei had to be secured from peers abroad and transformed into finished tools through the actions of non-elite artisans. Rites celebrated on and around special-purpose buildings drew their power from religious observances conducted outside elite control, within house groups. Exacerbating the structure’s instability was the failure of any one elite faction to create and dominate a single, society-wide web. Unable to control the local use of key conceptual and physical assets exclusively, the two prominent households were locked in an unresolved competition over adherents. This contest required the expenditure of considerable political capital in the form of feasts, obsidian cores, and decorated ceramics. Such siphoning off of energy and resources in constant negotiations for supporters meant these assets were not available to sustain projects aimed at creating a single hierarchical structure that encompassed the entire basin. Consequently, power relations were fragmented by the early sixteenth century, and the political situation was probably volatile.

Sustaining such a tense political order within one society over any length of time would have been difficult. We argued in chapter 2 that all networks are enacted and defined by their members’ participation in common projects. What shared activities might have been used to diffuse some of the tension among competing elites and their webs of adherents and to forge some sense of
unity among them? One possibility is that events that transpired in and around the community buildings, Strs. 144-8 and 144-18, served this purpose. Site PVN 144 is located between Site PVN 306 and Naco. It is also the only known household to include sizable constructions that might have served as gathering places for leading members of the settlement cluster. This impression could, of course, result from incomplete and incommensurate excavation samples. Nevertheless, the large, open, elaborately outfitted rooms that cap Str. 144-8 and probably its northern neighbor are unusual among known late prehistoric Naco valley constructions, as are the masks that flank their western entryways. These two constructions stand out markedly from all other examples of contemporary architecture in the basin.

The other buildings comprising the Site PVN 144 main plaza are also notably different from those recorded at Naco and Site PVN 306. In no other case did we locate constructions dedicated to food processing (Str. 144-11), the storage and cooking of comestibles (Str. 144-5-2nd), and possibly food serving (Str. 144-5-1st). The gatherings of influential individuals atop the two western edifices may have been accompanied by large-scale feasting conducted within the neighboring patio. The high density of incense burners found in the Str. 144-19, Unit 1 trash deposit and the deities depicted on the stucco masks imply that these convocations were carried out within a sacred context. That context, however, was likely associated with supernatural forces distinct to some extent from those that presided over local performances of the Quetzalcoatl cult at Naco and Site PVN 306. The masks adorning Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 are not replicated elsewhere in the valley and may represent deities different from those evoked in the western plazas of Naco and Site PVN 306. Insofar as opposing households in the Naco settlement cluster employed symbols of the Quetzalcoatl cult in contests over adherents, the invocation of other supernatural forces on Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 may have created a neutral space in which erstwhile competitors could gather and cooperate, at least in some situations.

If this was the case, then Site PVN 144 was both a place of residence for those of intermediate status (in Strs. 144-1 and 144-2) and a locale where at least some segments of the broader society gathered periodically to resolve conflicts and reinforce the unity of the settlement-wide net of which they were parts. By dividing participation in these rites of intensification between those meeting in Strs. 144-8 and 144-18 and others gathered in the plaza, distinctions of rank were maintained even in the course of reproducing network solidarity. Site PVN 144’s main plaza and community structures were, in short, loci for enacting projects that defined a hierarchically structured network that encompassed the entire settlement cluster. This remained a web, however, in which power contests might be muted but were not fully resolved.
This reconstruction generally parallels forms of “multepal,” or corporate, leadership attested to throughout the late prehistoric Maya lowlands (e.g., Freidel and Sabloff 1984: 182; Kepecs and Masson 2003; Masson 2003b; Pugh 2003; see also Blanton, Feinman, and Peregrine 1996; Renfrew 1974). There is no reason to think that this mode of political organization was imported from distant locales. Rather, rule by council seems to have been a solution to resolving power contests within weakly centralized polities that was adopted in numerous locales across southern Mesoamerica. Apparently, residents of the Naco valley were among the participants in this widespread political experiment.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate non-elites’ capacity simply to ignore their rulers as they saw fit. Clearly, relatively large numbers of people were attracted to live near households established at Sites PVN 144, PVN 306, and Naco and, once there, to contribute to the construction of elite residences. They also attended public gatherings in designated plazas and committed themselves to the regular upkeep of symbols integral to the performance of rites conducted by local notables. The majority was part of the order that privileged some at the expense of many. These individuals, organized within their own domestic webs, did exact some benefit from these unequal relations, however. Through their bargaining with elites, obsidian blades were made widely available, and celebrations of house group unity were not only permitted but encouraged. Elites could rule, but only with the consent of the governed, and that consent did not come cheap. The result was a hierarchical structure in which power differences were muted.

NACO AND INTER-SOCIAIETAL INTERACTION

It has long been acknowledged that Naco, however it is defined, occupied a central role in exchange networks stretching from Mesoamerica deep into lower Central America (Chamberlain 1966; Strong, Kidder, and Paul 1938; Wonderley 1981). It is more than a little ironic, therefore, that Wonderley and we have unearthed so little evidence in support of this interpretation. There is no reason to doubt the veracity of Conquest period accounts or to speculate on other possible locations for Naco. A sizable settlement, or collection of settlements, certainly existed at the appropriate place and for the expected period of time. In fact, taken together, Naco and Sites PVN 144 and PVN 306 comprise one of the largest late prehistoric aggregations of people archaeologically attested to in Southeast Mesoamerica. The size of the Naco settlement cluster, at least, warrants acceptance of its prehispanic significance.

The rarity of trade goods is likely the result of a host of factors. A similar dearth of foreign commodities at the well-known entrepôt of Cozumel, off Yucatan’s east coast, was explained by the perishable nature of many of the items
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exchanged (e.g., Berdan et al. 2003: 100). Further, commercial transactions wherein the value of goods lies in their utility in acquiring other commodities are not conducive to accumulating valuables at trading centers (Freidel and Sabloff 1984; Rathje and Sabloff 1973; Sabloff and Freidel 1975).

At the same time, looting has taken a toll on the artifact inventories of all three studied settlements. Wonderley recorded the presence of copper axes and bells, reported to have come from Naco, in a private collection (1981). No such preciosities are known from the other two centers, although we cannot rule out their existence. Sites PVN 306 and PVN 144 were being transformed by farming and modern settlement when first examined, and any marketable items likely did not remain on-site for long once uncovered.

The absence of evidence for trade can therefore be explained. These accounts of what might have been are at best plausible but unsatisfying. They do not contradict the scant ethnohistoric chronicles of Naco’s socioeconomic importance even as they do not support them. What is much clearer from the materials in hand is the extent to which the valley’s population was implicated in networks that extended well outside the basin. The symbols emblazoned on red-on-white–painted ceramic containers are, as has been noted, inspired in part by foreign models, especially those provided by the Quetzalcoatl cult. Even more emblematic of that faith are the circular constructions that occupy prominent positions in Naco’s and Site PVN 306’s western public plazas.

To be sure, the nature and degree of participation in this “cult” were variable. Elites were more fully versed in foreign theologies than were their subordinates. The latter experienced exotic ideas and practices as mediated by notables who lived in the predominant households. Still, even where religions inspired by distant models are fused with parochial worldviews and icons, their adoption affects the course of local developments, if for no other reason than those developments, and understandings of them, are now couched in broader contexts. By linking local practices, such as food consumption, to concepts of broad application, the significance of comestibles and the networks through which they were shared must have changed. This was, after all, what we posited elites were trying to accomplish: forging new affiliations that transcended immediate domestic ties. The enactment of these expanded relations and identities in public gatherings suggests that the strategy was at least partially successful. What we cannot determine is the extent to which participants in such convocations used these novel ideas to imagine ties with people and supernatural figures beyond the valley’s confines. At least there was an opportunity to make such connections, which had not existed during the preceding Early Postclassic.

The extent to which foreign concepts spurred the Naco valley’s residents to reconceptualize their world may never be known. Similarly, whatever behavioral
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consequences such shifts might have had for local political contests in the long run went unrealized when Spanish invaders truncated the basin’s autochthonous historical trajectory. What is clear is that the ideas and symbols that defined the Mesoamerican world, such as feathered serpents and circular ritual constructions, were creatively reconstituted in the daily practices of numerous agents acting within conditions that pertained in specific places at particular moments in time. To understand how seemingly “universal” symbols figured in parochial political and cultural processes, we must investigate the manner in which they were employed in the goal-seeking actions of people working in webs of varying spatial extents. The Naco valley represents one of what were likely many ways of synthesizing the local and the interregional.

THE ROBLE PHASE’S PLACE WITHIN THE NACO VALLEY’S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORY

When we consider the broad sweep of Naco valley prehistory, the Roble phase marks one of several periods of increased political centralization and hierarchy building. Each of these spikes in complexity is separated by intervals in which unified realms fragmented and inequalities were suppressed. Centralization and hierarchy were most pronounced during the Terminal Preclassic (200 BC–AD 200) and the Late Classic, when Site PVN 123 and La Sierra, respectively, were the sole primate centers in the basin. The Roble phase represents a final resurgence of powerful indigenous elites. Once more, notables were seeking to enmesh small domestic groups within larger, hierarchically ordered political structures.

There is no reason to believe this process had come to an end by the time the Spanish arrived. As noted earlier, hierarchies were still relatively rudimentary, and two major power centers coexisted within the same overarching society. How extant networks might have been reformulated in a future unencumbered by Spanish colonialism will remain forever unknown. It is possible, however, to look back from the edge of history to see how the machinations of the Naco valley’s last rulers compare with strategies implemented by their precursors. Attention here focuses specifically on the Late Classic, the period of political centralization for which we have the most detailed information.

Acquisition of power in the Late Classic and Roble phase was pursued through parallel strategies. In both cases, elites sought to create bounded societies in which they held sway. This objective was achieved through the imposition of centralized control over the intra-valley acquisition, fabrication, and distribution of certain tangible and conceptual assets that were valued widely within the realm but could only be obtained from polity leaders. Such monopolies enabled notables in each instance to subvert the autonomy of lo-
calized domestic webs and enforce participation in a hierarchically structured network directed by paramount lords. Success in these efforts depended in both intervals on the participation of Naco valley magnates in webs that linked them with their counterparts in other realms, from whom at least some of these essential resources and ideas were regularly and predictably secured. The extra-valley nets in question were constructed around shared understandings and practices expressed through a limited array of physical symbols that materialized network membership. In the Late Classic and Roble phase, the conceptual frameworks that guided inter-elite transactions were derived from lowland Maya notables at Copan and the Quetzalcoatl cult, respectively. Nevertheless, interactions conducted across borders were apparently pursued among equals in both cases. All participants in the transactions were thus free to reinterpret, up to a point, the unifying symbol system to fit their own understandings and circumstances.

In essence, therefore, Roble phase political processes were instigated by strategies that mirrored those pursued approximately five centuries earlier within the basin. The primary differences involve the greater degree to which La Sierra’s magnates meddled with the means of production, the form of ruler-ship Late Classic elites sought to impose, and the ways paramount lords employed foreign symbols to delimit and unify their realm.

Unlike Roble phase notables, who indirectly supervised the distribution of obsidian blades through the strategic distribution of cores, La Sierra’s paramount lords organized production in a variety of media on relatively large scales. These notables oversaw workshops located at their capital, where artisans fabricated obsidian blades, ceramic vessels in at least two large stone-lined kilns, artifact blanks from marine shell, and the production of ceramic figurines, whistles, and ocarinas. Data in hand suggest that very few residents of rural areas engaged in crafts and were largely dependent on artisans working at the center for such widely used items as pottery vessels, obsidian blades, and ritual paraphernalia (figurines, whistles, ocarinas, and probably ceramic incense burners); marine shell blanks were exported and not apparently turned into finished goods for local consumption. These crafts involved imported obsidian and shell as well as high-quality clays that were especially plentiful in La Sierra’s immediate environs. Local rulers, therefore, successfully managed to procure raw materials on a large scale and supervise the conversion of these assets into finished goods. There is no sign of such extensive interference by elites in the relations of production during the Roble phase.

Late Classic Naco lords, like their Roble phase counterparts, also organized themselves into a household, with their residences arranged around a central plaza (figure 10.1). The Late Classic paramount plaza group, however, is far larger than those raised at Sites PVN 306, PVN 144, and Naco. In addition,
no other Late Classic Naco valley domestic compound compares in size to the La Sierra example. Thus there was only one Late Classic paramount household whose members exercised privileged control over large amounts of labor. This situation contrasts with the more modest constructions seen in the Roble phase basin, as well as with the dual, roughly equivalent power centers housed at Naco and Site PVN 306. Hierarchy during the Late Classic was therefore more pronounced and clearly focused on a specific household than in later periods of valley prehistory.

The nature of rulership also differed. Late Classic lords participated in lowland Maya-inspired rites that stressed the potency of individual rulers and their connections with deified ancestors (Freidel, Schele, and Parker 1995; Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986). Paraphernalia associated with this conceptual scheme was found almost exclusively within the plaza of the La Sierra paramount household and included modeled incense burners, *Spondylus* sp. shells, and a carved stone tenoned head adorned with a simplified version of the turban that distinguished Maya rulers at contemporary Copan. Artifacts in the first two classes were used by lowland Maya aristocrats in rites that evoked and celebrated deities, especially royal ancestors (Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Miller 1986). These objects were likely employed in much the same way by rulers at La Sierra, one of whom was commemorated on the aforementioned tenoned sculpture, the only portrait recovered from any time period in the valley. Late Classic leadership, in short, was apparently vested in the hands of charismatic individuals and presumably their families. This is in
sharp contrast to the faceless, more corporate forms of political structures that characterized the basin in the Roble phase and during all other known intervals (see also Blanton, Feinman, and Peregrine 1996; Renfrew 1974).

The affiliation that spanned the Late Classic valley was conveyed through symbols unique to that realm (Schortman, Urban, and Ausec 2001). As in the Roble phase, these emblems appeared prominently on ceramic containers used by all valley residents to store and serve comestibles (see figure 8.5). Once again, therefore, elites seeking to forge bonds among distinct domestic webs linked expressions of a novel affiliation with processes of food sharing through which relations within these intimate groups were regularly enacted.

The power of polity-wide networks and their identities were infused with the potent and positive feelings generated during celebrations of domestic unity. Unlike the Roble phase instance, however, signifiers of the Late Classic polity-wide net did not incorporate foreign motifs. All residents of the basin had access to imported polychrome vessels, mostly cylinders emblazoned with symbols that expressed exotic concepts. These containers were not, in any obvious way, used to define membership in the La Sierra domain, and their styles were not incorporated in local products. Such a division suggests that vessels bearing foreign and parochially inspired designs conveyed very different meanings possibly tied to equally divergent networks in which all of the basin’s inhabitants took part to varying degrees. No comparable pattern was recorded in the Roble phase valley, where imported ceramics were extremely rare.

Along similar lines, whereas architectural emblems of participation in the Quetzalcoatl cult were prominently displayed in public arenas, their Late Classic counterparts were hidden away within the plaza of the paramount household. The latter were apparently temples used in the performance of rites led by elites who resided on the surrounding platforms. By locating these ritual foci away from public view, La Sierra’s lords maintained a strict separation between parochial and foreign conceptual structures tied to rulership. The latter were seemingly the unique provenance of rulers unsullied, from the elite perspective, by local associations. The one exception to this trend was the La Sierra ballcourt, which was situated southeast of the primary household compound and could easily have been reached by large numbers of people. There is no evidence, however, that foreign and autochthonous symbols were synthesized in the practice of public rites during the Late Classic, as they were in the Roble phase.

Late Classic and Roble phase lords, therefore, promoted novel political orders by strategically deploying tangible and conceptual resources. People were motivated to participate in these hierarchically structured networks by centralized control over widely needed goods and the promotion of beliefs that
stressed the essential unity of valley populations. La Sierra’s magnates empha-
sized their privileged position within this newly imagined realm by linking
themselves exclusively to supernatural forces, possibly including their own dei-
fied ancestors. These magnates even went so far as to single out in a durable
material form a specific member of the ruling cadre as a paramount ruler, a step
no known Naco valley monarch had dared to make before or would advance
later.

Ultimately, even the striking success of La Sierra’s potentates rested on the
same sorts of negotiations with elite peers, artisans, and their subordinates in
general in which Roble phase leaders had engaged. Insofar as power at home
depended on acquiring goods from afar, the political preeminence of Late
Classic and Roble phase lords hung by the slender threads that connected them
to all other members of their inter-elite network. Disruptions at any point in
the web that interfered with the movement of goods and ideas across it could
seriously undermine the political aspirations of all participants. The collapse
of the Copanec dynasty in the early ninth century may have been particularly
ominous for all those who patterned their interactions on symbolic structures
inspired by that center’s monarchs (Andrews and Fash, eds. 2005; Fash 2001;
see also Renfrew 1982). It is not surprising, therefore, that the La Sierra rul-
ers fell from power sometime during that same century, with their household
abandoned and its temples dismantled and buried along with the vast majority
of their distinctive ritual gear.

Similarly, once artisans were established at the Late Classic capital under
elite patronage, they comprised another interest group whose needs had to be
satisfied to ensure their cooperation in elite political projects. In fact, potters,
blade knappers, and the like were sufficiently numerous that they could have
formed their own networks based on the shared experiences of their crafts and
their positions within the realm. The fact that they lived close together at La
Sierra would have facilitated the creation of such webs. There is good evidence
that Late Classic craft workers not only survived the fall of their erstwhile
patrons but actually flourished during the prolonged period of political frag-
mentation that characterized the Terminal Classic. Freed of centralized control,
artisans not only continued to pursue their specialties at the capital but were
now found in nearly every domestic group scattered in all parts of the valley.
Attempts to create a centrally administered economy of craft specialists may
have ultimately contributed to the creation of powerful interest groups who,
when they united, posed a serious threat to those they were intended to serve.

Whatever role(s) craft workers played in the demise of centralized rule at
La Sierra, it is clear that the political preeminence of paramount elites in the
Late Classic and Roble phase was always fragile and relied on maintaining the
goodwill of the governed. Efforts to create a ruling class dramatically separated
from its subordinates, on the model of lowland Maya potentates, did not succeed. Leaders and followers were forever linked in negotiations over the terms of inequality, the degree to which power could be stripped from the many and vested in the hands of a few, and the creation of identities linking localized domestic webs within broader affiliations. Such contests consistently employed both abstract and palpable assets derived from local and foreign sources. Elites, however, never reached the point where they could determine absolutely how these resources would be deployed in creating debt and redefining the conceptual realm. Their subordinates always maintained a say in the matter. Political formations during the Roble phase can therefore be understood as outgrowths of earlier developments and political experiments that unfolded under historical conditions specific to the last Precolumbian centuries.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The value of any perspective lies to a great extent in its ability to raise new questions that lead to productive insights. We argue that concentrating on networks, as opposed to spatially bounded societies and realms, accomplishes this goal by recasting processes of political centralization and hierarchy building in helpful ways.

It does so because a network perspective focuses attention firmly on how political processes operate close to the ground. By examining how people organized themselves to employ resources in pursuit of common political projects, we are forced to consider how claims to power are advanced, defended, and challenged through the actions of self-reflexive, variably well-informed, goal-driven actors. This has at least the salutary effect of delaying efforts to identify causative structural variables before fully understanding what it is we are trying to explain. By identifying the crucial and shifting nexus among networks, assets, and projects, we can make a good start in describing political processes and specifying what has to be accounted for in understanding these relations.

The use of networks as basic units of analysis also yields a more fluid and, we would argue, more realistic picture of interpersonal relations than do approaches that treat bounded societies as starting points for study. Rather than beginning by trying to identify territorially distinct units, we are encouraged to reimagine such entities as the outcomes of decisions people made to affiliate with some and distance themselves from others in pursuit of certain aims under ever-shifting circumstances. The resulting linkages are never fixed and are subject to reevaluation as conditions change. These connections also differ considerably in their spatial extents, tying people directly and indirectly to small-scale domestic webs as well as to their counterparts who reside over considerable distances. Societies, in short, are seen as networks of networks,
the relations and movements among which are negotiated by their members. Different materials, in this view, are integral to the enactment of variably evanescent webs, and their patterning must be described and explained in relation to the operation of these nets and the goals of those allied within them.

Finally, as outlined in chapter 2, a network perspective is beneficial in that it encourages a reconsideration of the venerable divide in social theory between structure and agency (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984; Mauss 2007). A network approach is founded on the notion that political structure does not exist independent of the events through which power relations are enacted (Mauss 2007; Schortman 2008). Structure and action are inextricably intertwined because all initiatives, political and otherwise, are enabled through the mobilization of conceptual and physical resources derived from structure. Marshaling such assets, in turn, requires cooperation among actors organized within networks to accomplish shared goals. Webs are therefore simultaneously parts of, and the means for changing, structure.

All interactions, within and outside the political sphere, are thus constrained and enabled by the resources people secure through participation in established nets into which they are born (Giddens 1984; Goffman 1974; Mann 1986; Sewell 1992). Such assets and webs may seem to exist apart from, and to be causally prior to, action. This is true insofar as structural relations among networks and resources constitute blueprints for behavior. Nevertheless, these models for action must be actualized through the deeds of agents to have social significance. Crucial to the conversion of potential into behavior are the willingness, creativity, enthusiasm, or lack of same that people bring to their use of extant nets and how they manipulate resources in pursuit of the projects through which structure lives.

Political structure, therefore, is only relevant insofar as its precepts are acted upon and is always subject to change as people renegotiate their membership in, and relations among, different networks, contend for assets through those webs, and (re)define the projects they pursue with their confederates. Decisions on how to proceed in all these endeavors are determined by the structured relations among the webs to which individuals are heir, the changing circumstances in which these relations are enacted, and the capacity of people to perceive and seize the opportunities to modify the structure these shifting conditions provide.

The political formations we have described were therefore products of history and of what the Naco valley’s Roble phase denizens made of those traditions. When the first Spanish conquistadors arrived on the scene, power relations were still in flux. People organized within different networks that extended over varying distances were staking claims to preeminence and resisting those pretensions through the strategic manipulation of key conceptual and
material resources. Some had gained advantages in these contests, but their ability to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population in both power and position remained limited. The capacity of people organized within houses to mobilize basic physical and ideological resources meant they could enact projects that ensured the vitality of these numerous small webs. Control over such resources provided a foundation from which elite pretensions could be challenged and their claims on labor and support curbed. No house group was autonomous, however. Their participants needed access to items and symbols that local lords alone provided. Such key assets could therefore be used to reward engagement in projects through which new, hierarchically structured webs were constituted and reproduced.

The result was a society with variably porous boundaries in which ideas, symbols, and objects that were derived from varied distances and spanned centuries figured in competitions for political advantage among members of different domestic webs. How this emerging society was bounded and understood by its members is an important question. It is not, however, the most fruitful point from which to begin to understand the dynamic interplay among the factions from which that society arose. It is far more productive, we contend, to begin such analyses with concepts that more directly address how social interactions were structured rather than with the outcomes of those transactions in the form of a society. That is what we have attempted here.