



Domestic economies and regional transition: Household multicrafting and lake exploitation in pre-Aztec Central Mexico



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ABSTRACT

This article takes a micro-archaeology approach to investigating household production strategies using data derived from Early to Middle Postclassic (A.D. 900–1350) houses from Xaltocan, Mexico, an island capital in the northern Basin of Mexico. I examine household production strategies by integrating multiple lines of evidence including microartifacts, soil chemistry, and macroartifact remains to document a diversity of household production activities, including the manufacture of goods that are typically invisible archaeologically such as foods and perishable goods. Next, I consider changes in subsistence practices through time in order to understand household scheduling and labor allocation strategies. The results indicate that households in pre-Aztec Xaltocan not only pursued diverse economic strategies, but also engaged in multiple types of production activities, including the manufacture of food products and other utilitarian goods derived from lake resources. I conclude that households were fundamental to economic development in ancient political economies and were enmeshed in broader systems of power and networks of exchange.

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Introduction

Household production was central to the development of ancient economic systems (Costin, 2001b; D'Altroy and Hastorf, 2001; Feinman and Nicholas, 2000; Hastorf, 1991; Özbal, 2006; Sheets, 2000; Smith et al., 2003; Smith, 1999; Wattenmaker, 1994); however, the significance of domestic economies to macro-scale change is often overlooked. This oversight may result from several factors. First, households frequently engaged in the part-time and small-scale manufacture of goods for exchange (Arnold, 1991; Costin, 2001a, 2005; Flad and Hruby, 2007; Hirth, 2009a, 2009b; Wattenmaker, 1994; Wilk, 1997), which is less visible in broad regional surveys than large-scale production workshops. Second, many households produced perishable utilitarian goods that are difficult to document archaeologically, such as foods or baskets, providing archaeologists with only a fragmentary understanding of the true range and scale of domestic production activities. Finally, the household has historically been stereotyped as the private domain, or female sphere, and commonly employed public versus private dichotomies uncritically place broader economic and political change exclusively in the public (male) domain (Brumfiel and Nichols, 2009; Brumfiel and Robin, 2008). Yet, a focus on commoner households is essential because it is at this level that most production and consumption took place (Feinman and

Nicholas, 2000; Hirth, 2011a). In fact, in ancient Mesoamerica, while full-time workshops existed, the majority of production for exchange took place in domestic contexts (Charlton et al., 1991; Feinman and Nicholas, 2000; Hirth, 2009b, 2011a).

In this article, I take a microarchaeology approach to investigating household production strategies in Xaltocan, Mexico, a pre-Aztec island capital in the northern Basin of Mexico during the Early to Middle Postclassic period (A.D. 900–1350). I examine household production strategies by integrating multiple lines of evidence including microartifacts, soil chemistry and macroartifact data to document a diversity of household production activities, including the manufacture of goods that are typically invisible archaeologically such as foods and perishable goods. I then consider changes in subsistence practices through time in order to understand household scheduling and labor allocation strategies. The results indicate that households in pre-Aztec Xaltocan not only pursued diverse economic strategies, but also engaged in multiple types of production activities, or multicrafting (Hirth, 2009b), including fish processing and the manufacture of other utilitarian goods derived from lacustrine resources. I argue that the exploitation of the surrounding lake by commoners was fundamental to the development of Xaltocan's economy. As noted by Richard Wilk (1997:8), "the household unit has become recognized as the most important and informative level of analysis for understanding how individual and group action leads to structural transformation on a larger scale." By focusing on household economies, this article seeks to better understand the growth of Xaltocan into an

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important regional center and offers insight into how micro- and macro-institutions are mutually constituted.

Identifying household production

Archaeologists studying production within the Basin of Mexico and in surrounding regions have focused primarily on the household manufacture of lithics and ceramics (Brumfiel, 1986, 1987; Castanzo, 2009; Charlton, 1982; Charlton et al., 1991; Crider, 2007; Feinman et al., 1992; Feinman and Nicholas, 2000; Hirth, 2009b; Nichols, 1994; Otis Charlton et al., 1993; Pool, 2009; Spence, 1985), as these processes leave behind durable traces that can be easily recognized archaeologically, even if those traces are relocated to middens (Hirth, 2011a). Cases of extreme preservation where organic remains are preserved, however, suggest that households in ancient Mesoamerica produced a much wider variety of goods for exchange than is typically documented archaeologically (Serra Puche, 1988; Sheets, 2000). For example, with the aid of artifacts and ecofacts left *in situ*, Payson Sheets (2000) found that at Ceren, a Maya village buried by volcanic ash, all households engaged in the part-time specialization of different surplus commodities destined for market exchange, and many produced multiple products. Sites with unusual preservation such as Ceren suggest that households at sites with regular preservation likely engaged in a more diverse array of activities than has been documented by archaeologists. Thus, the most visible types of manufacturing activities (ceramics and stone tools) provide us with only a limited understanding of domestic economies. The identification of domestic production activities is particularly problematic in lake-shore communities such as Xaltocan, which in colonial times were renowned for the sale of perishable lake products including fish, waterfowl, and reed mats (see below).

Further complicating our understanding of household production, houses in ancient Mesoamerica were meticulously swept, often on a daily basis, therefore few macroartifacts tend to remain *in situ* on house floors for interpreting activity areas (Hayden and Cannon, 1983; Hutson and Stanton, 2007; Murray, 1980). Moreover, when houses were abandoned they were typically cleared of tools and useful materials and sometimes were even ritually destroyed (Stross, 1998), making it difficult for archaeologists to identify production areas or understand how activities were organized at the household level. Even when artifacts are recovered directly from room floors, they do not necessarily represent their original contexts of use, as these objects are portable and may have been moved.

Methods of microanalysis, however, offer potential for identifying a wider range of production activities. For example, microartifacts, tiny remnants from human activities, become trampled into living surfaces and thus are spatially indicative of the locations of domestic activities because they “become part of the living-surface matrix as it accumulates, leaving a diachronic record of activities throughout the life of the structure” (Rosen, 1989:565). High concentrations of microartifacts in a single location would thus represent long-term repetitive contexts for activities (Hodder and Cessford, 2004). The study of microdebris has proved successful in locating activity areas, living surfaces, and defining room function (Fladmark, 1982; Matthews et al., 1997; Metcalfe and Heath, 1990; Özbal, 2006; Rainville, 2000; Rosen, 1989; Stahl and Zeidler, 1990). Similarly, residues from human activities become incorporated and absorbed into floor sediments and can be chemically detected (Barba, 1986; Middleton, 2004; Middleton et al., 2010). Ethnoarchaeological research has demonstrated that different activities leave behind different chemical residues (Barba, 1986; Barba and Ortiz, 1992; Middleton and Price, 1996) and that residues from anthropogenic activities are similar cross-culturally

(Middleton et al., 2005). Even under severe weathering conditions due to open exposure, chemical elements are durable and can be studied (Manzanilla and Barba, 1990).

In this article, I integrate microartifact analysis and soil chemistry with a contextual analysis of macroartifact remains and ethnohistoric data to identify a broader range of production activities at Xaltocan. I then consider how household production was organized both within and between households in order to better understand the economic decision-making strategies of commoners and how domestic economies articulated with the broader political economy.

Basin of Mexico exchange

Markets had developed in the Basin of Mexico as early as the Epiclassic period (A.D. 650–900), and the presence of a wide diversity of imported goods in all commoner contexts indicates that these goods were obtained through marketplace exchange rather than redistribution or elite gifting (Hirth, 1998). Here, I follow Garraty's (2010:6) definition of markets as “institutions predicated on the principles of market exchange of alienable commodities” and market exchange as “economic transactions where the forces of supply and demand are visible and where prices or exchange equivalences exist” (Feinman and Garraty, 2010:171). The Early Postclassic (A.D. 900–1150) and Middle Postclassic (A.D. 1150–1350) Basin of Mexico, as argued by Hodge and Minc (1990:433), can be best described as having non-centralized market exchange where exchange occurred freely among polities within confederations but was constrained by confederation borders. Minc et al. (1994:164) argue that at this time, “...exchange interactions, constrained by the major political divisions of the pre-imperial period, were organized through a series of sub-regional market systems that corresponded spatially to confederation territories of allied city-states.” Exchange became increasingly centralized in the Late Postclassic period (A.D. 1350–1521) as the Basin became politically unified (Hodge and Minc, 1990).

Distribution systems in the Late Postclassic Basin of Mexico were based on broadly articulated, competitive market exchange (Berdan, 1985; Blanton, 1996; Brumfiel, 1980; Garraty, 2007; Hicks, 1987). While the state exacted tribute demands on peasants and nobles, the needs of elites and urban populations could not be met through the tribute system alone, requiring everyone to participate in marketplace exchange (Blanton, 1996). Historic accounts of marketplace exchange, the existence of currencies, and the lack of large storage facilities all indicate that markets were central to the Aztec political economy (Feinman and Garraty, 2010). Moreover, the presence of a wide diversity of imported commodities found archaeologically in both elite and commoner contexts suggests that goods were obtained through market exchange, as everyone had access to the same goods, regardless of social rank (Garraty, 2000; Rodríguez-Alegría, 2010; Smith et al., 2003). Nonetheless, the Aztec state interfered with the market system by siphoning off tax revenue (Garraty, 2007), manipulating exchange networks and fostering regional market specialization (Hassig, 1985), controlling prices (Carrasco, 1978), increasing reliance on markets (Berdan, 1978; Brumfiel, 1980; Hicks, 1987), and undermining local production (Brumfiel, 1980; Hassig, 1985). Research in the Basin of Mexico has successfully documented the presence of markets (Garraty, 2009; Hirth, 1998), the origins and development of market systems (Blanton, 1996; Brumfiel, 1980; Hicks, 1987), and the organization of exchange (Hodge, 1992; Hodge and Minc, 1990; Minc, 1994, 2009; Nichols et al., 2002; Nichols et al., 2009; Smith, 1979) by focusing on large-scale patterns of exchange at the regional level. However, the ways in which ordinary commoners participated in marketplace exchange and

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